Emmett Syster thought he was having a bad day when his junk disappeared. Then it got worse.
That old black magic’s got me in its spell, 
that old black magic that you weave so well. 
Those icy fingers up and down my spine, 
the same old witchcraft when your eyes meet mine. 
… In this magic, black magic called love.

From: “That Old Black Magic”,
lyrics by Johnny Mercer

To the ardent fans
of absurdist TG fiction...

Your dreams are alive and well
here at Amanda’s Reading Room.

And with kind appreciation
to John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.
Thanks for the loan of the Balrog.
I’ll send it back in time for its dinner.

Amanda Hawkins
“That Old Black Magic”
by Amanda Hawkins

Amanda Hawkins Publications

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I’m not sure how I knew. It’s not like guys are constantly in full tactile communication with their junk every minute of every day. But as I sat there in the meeting, listening to my team leader eviscerate us for yet again failing to keep up with the schedule, I suddenly felt like something was wrong—down there.

I didn’t let on, at first. I leaned back a bit and let my hands slip into my lap, like you do when you’re distracted. And boy was I ever distracted. My fingers probed the area in question, as if I was responding to a slight itch. Nothing.

And I mean nothing. No bump, just empty folds of cloth. What the hell?

I might have said that out loud. I shot from my seat, one hand jammed down my pants. Nothing but smooth skin, from pelvis to butt crack. Not so much as a pubic hair could I find, though that was the least of my worries.

“Mister Syster, is something the matter?” The lecture had stopped. Everyone was staring, mouths agape. Small wonder. My pants were down around my ankles and both hands were fully invested in the search. Nothing.

“It’s gone!” It was halfway between a shout and a sob.

Brett Corrigan dropped his clipboard on the table. “What’s gone, Emmett?”

“My—my dick. It’s gone. Everything’s gone. There’s nothing there.”

“That seems rather unlikely. Did you check your pockets?” Nervous laughter ran around the table.

I glared at the man. Only two years older than me. Who put him in charge? “You think this is funny? Laugh this off, dude.” I yanked my boxers down.

The laughter stopped. Nothing funny about acres of bare flesh in a man’s crotch. Silence. After awhile someone ventured “What happened to it?”

My legs gave out. I dropped back into my chair, still naked from the waist down. “How do I know? It was there when I hit the john before the meeting. Maybe one of you guys stole it.” I scanned around the table; twelve disbelieving faces, with me the unlucky number thirteen.

“Don’t be absurd.” Corrigan’s voice was full of scorn. “If someone had managed to get into your pants and hack the thing off, there’d be blood everywhere.”

More silence. Finally, one of the others—not Corrigan, whose attention was focused on his laptop—said, “For God’s sake, pull your pants up.”

I was in shock, but that snapped me out of it. What the hell was I doing, sitting there half-naked? I’d never be able to convince these people of anything; so far as
they knew I might never have had a normal set of male equipment. Some people are just born that way, neither male nor female.

I yanked up my shorts, then my pants. “Sorry, Brett. Didn’t mean to bust up the meeting.” My face was flushed. I could barely breathe. The room was warm—too warm. I needed air, among other things. “I should go.”

With those words, I fled.

*

My doctor was no more sympathetic than my co-workers. “You should have come to me sooner,” he said. “Surgery like this requires regular post-operative care. You should be on a male hormone replacement program. I’m surprised you haven’t experienced any sub-mammary growth.”

“But it just happened—like, this morning.”

“Nonsense. The surgical scars are completely healed. That would take several months, even for a fast healer. For most people, closer to a year. It’s wonderful work, by the way. In the right hands, plastic surgery is nearly a form of art. My notes from your last physical, eighteen months ago, indicate that your genitalia was quite normal; were it not for that, I might well believe you’d been intersex from birth. Dare I ask who your surgeon was?”

I stared at him. “I have no idea. It—just—happened. Today.”

He frowned and made a note in my file. “Can you tell me why?”

My stare shifted to the floor. This was going nowhere.

“As I said, there were no abnormalities in that area. Even if there had been, it was rather unusual for the surgeon to remove the entire structure. So, again… was it an infection? An accident of some sort? Were you attacked?”

I made my apologies and left, promising to return asap for the results from the blood test he wanted me to take. Like that would do any good.

*

My best friend Raphael wouldn’t believe a word of it until I presented him with the evidence. Even then, he couldn’t accept that it ‘just happened’. “I think you’d have noticed someone getting into your pants with a knife, dude.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” We were back in our seats in the pub, after a quick trip to the bathroom to drop my pants for him in private. God knows what a casual
onlooker would’ve made of that. “There’s no wound, there was no blood—and there was no pain. So it wasn’t a knife. Or anything sharp.”

“What then? Black magic? Somebody rip the nuts off a voodoo doll?”

I sucked down more beer. “Dunno about that. Could’ve been some sort of magic. Or something really high-tech, like from the future.”

Rafe smirked. “Captain Kirk beamed your dick into orbit?”

“I didn’t say that! Dammit, you could be a little more sympathetic.”

“Sorry. Kinda hard to take seriously, you know. It’s like your doc said, this must have happened a year ago. I’ll take your word—and his—that you ever had the equipment, but… we gotta go by the evidence, right?”

“I got all the evidence I need—when I whacked off, night before last.”

“Too much information. Look, you haven’t been dating recently, right? And when was it Sheila dumped you? Over a year ago?”

“We split up. It was mutual. We wanted different stuff.”

“Sure, sure. My point is, as far as anyone knows, you can’t prove—like in a court of law—that you’ve had anything down there for the past year.”

“I guess not.” That’s when it hit me. What had happened was nothing short of diabolical. No one was ever going to believe me. Everyone would just assume that for whatever reason—accident, attack, personal choice—my equipment had been removed months in the past, and the only mystery was why I insisted on insisting otherwise. And for that, I was pretty sure words like ‘crazy’ and ‘stark raving out of his tree’ wouldn’t be far from anyone’s mind.

Somebody set me up, but good.

On my way home, it occurred to me to wonder just how—without a dick—I was going to get rid of all the liquid I’d just consumed. Visions of a bladder full to the point of exploding filled my head—but my unseen tormentor had thought of every damn thing. There was a tiny opening where a dick should be, and that’s where the stream emerged. The procedure did require me to sit down, of course, but I figured that was all part of the plan.

There had to be a plan, right? Stuff like this doesn’t just happen.

* 

The next day I found myself in Brett Corrigan’s office, chowing down on a huge portion of humble pie. With extra grovelling on the side; just the way he liked it.
“No worries, dude. It must be tough, losin’ your junk like that. Hard to figure you could spend a whole year—or whatever—in denial about something so blatant. The human mind is a funny thing, huh?”

I humbly agreed. Funny indeed. But I was all better now.

“Good, good…” He fell silent, brooding. Then: “Look, if all this is part of some sort of ‘transition’, now’s the time to get it out there.”

“Transition? What makes you say that?”

“Well, you’re letting your hair grow. That’s pretty obvious. At least it is now.” He rubbed his upper lip. “And shaving your ‘stache also makes you look a bit more feminine, but I guess that’s the whole point.”

“Huh? Shaving”—I rubbed my own upper lip. Bare as the proverbial baby’s butt. I couldn’t find even a trace of stubble. “What the hell? It was there when I left the apartment!”

Brett sighed. “C’mon, man. Seriously? You lost it on your way over?”

“I dunno… but it was there. Maybe someone—”

“Oh, God—you’re not gonna tell me someone stole your mustache, are you?”

“But it couldn’t just fall off… could it?”

“Jesus. You’ve been working too hard. I hope that’s all it is. Take the rest of the day off. Take the rest of the week off. Let’s see how you feel on Monday.”

I genuflected my way out the door and, once again, fled.

* 

I didn’t go straight home. Instead, I wandered down to the lake. The city pulled up just short of the water in a long row of high-rises designed to block the views of those unfortunate enough to live behind them—which, alas, included me.

My brain wouldn’t settle down. Maybe I should’ve skipped the double espresso, but habit trumps wisdom at times like this. At most times, actually. My junk was gone. Just to be sure I checked again, sneaking in a quick rub under the guise of zipping up my coat. Nothing. Flat as hell, assuming that hades lacks mountains of any noticeable height. Not much sensation either, which in its own way was a lot worse. I could deal with a lifetime of sitting on the can, but no more sky rockets in flight? No more afternoon delight? Unthinkable.

[Buckle up, babe. You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.]
Huh. That was an odd thing to think. Maybe Brett was right, I’ve been burning the midnight oil from both ends of the candle. Or whatever. A few days off wouldn’t hurt. I could grab some pizza, catch up on reading, binge-watch *Lord of the Rings*, and best of all sleep in. Come Monday all this would be forgotten.

With one tiny exception, of course: I still wouldn’t have a dick. Or for that matter, a mustache. The situation was unlikely to simply reverse itself—unless I was suffering through one hell of a hallucination, twenty-four hours and counting.

I reached Herseford Park, which occupied one corner of the confluence between the lake and the river that bisected our fair city. I found a bench overlooking a beach of nothing but rocks, sat and stared at the water, letting the subtle motion of waves soothe my apparently fevered mind. Then I called Raphael.

“You do realize,” he said, “that disrupting my lunch a capital offense.”

“You gotta help me. I’m goin’ nuts.” I fingered my upper lip. “Last night, at the pub… did I have a mustache, or not?”

“That’s why you called? Is that some sort of code? Are you being kidnapped?”

“No! I just need to know, okay?”

“Whatever. One awesome nose neighbor, you did have. Do I win a prize?”

I muttered to myself. “Jeez… what could possibly…”

“Am I to understand you no longer possess said ‘stache?”

I took a deep breath. “It disappeared. On my way in to work.”

“Disappeared. How does a mustache just—oh, I know. Someone wished it into the cornfield, right next to your junk.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“C’mon, Em. You know better than that. No one is ever gonna believe this crap. As for last night, I figured you managed to prank me somehow. Now this?”

“If it’s a prank, then it’s the best prank of all time—on me.” I could almost hear Rafe shaking his head. “I’m serious,” I said, gazing at the pattern of reflections in the water. “My boss thinks I’ve lost it. Told me to take the rest of the week off. I’m down by the lake.”

“Go home,” Rafe said. “Take a nap, or a bath, or whatever floats your… boat. Just try to relax, okay? I’ll stop by after work. We’ll grab a slice and talk.”

As good a plan as any, under the circumstances. I stood up, stretched, and felt a soft tickle on the back of my neck. The boss-man was right. I was past due for a trim. But not right now.
What did the doc say? Sub-mammary growth? I faced my dresser-top mirror, bare to the waist, and gently felt the tissue underneath nipples that themselves looked a bit larger than before. Something had changed, but it was hard to be certain. Guys don’t usually pay much attention to this area—on themselves.

[You like? There’s more where that came from, Emmie.]

Jesus, what was I thinking? I’ve had a serious hate on for that nickname ever since my mother began using it when I was too young to know better. Why dredge it up now? Sheila sometimes said it to get my goat riled up, and it worked every time. Kids at school said it to my face, and I suspected that people at work said it behind my back, but I’d never said it to my—

[Speaking of mumsy, are the women in your family a busty bunch?]

I gave my head a shake. Such strange thoughts… My mother did have a bit of a chest, come to think. Likewise my sister Janine, my aunt Laura, my other aunt Sylvia, my cousin Annabelle, my other cousin Francine—

[I get it! Very impressive. Better stock up on D-cup bras.]

My eyes closed. I imagined myself browsing for brassieres online, then checking out the lingerie department at the nearby Sears, discussing my ‘needs’ with a sales lady, being measured around the chest… But that made no sense.

[Very pretty ladies, the lot of ‘em. You’ve got a ways to go.]

I clutched at my chest, kneading the flesh inwards and upward to create what sort of looks like cleavage—the way guys do where they’re gassing around. Only it wasn’t me doing it. My hands seemed to have taken the initiative, all on their own. As I stared, apparently helpless to stop what I was doing, the cleavage deepened, then grew deeper still. What the hell?

Chalk one up for the aforementioned hallucination, now well into its second day. Or the power of positive thinking. Whatever the case, I seemed to have suddenly developed a small pair of breasts. Not quite in the same league as my mother’s, or even my sister’s, but not something that could easily be passed off as male either. I’d have to wear something loose to hide the evidence.

Always assuming, of course, that anyone else could even see the things.

[You take a lot of convincing. Try this on for size.]

My face twitched. Blinking, I rubbed at it with both hands, then studied my image in the mirror. It looked… different. Were my eyes bigger? A surprised expression can do that. Were my cheeks more prominent? Was my face narrower?
Not possible. Longer hair flopped over my ears. When did that happen?

I stepped back, hit the edge of the bed and sat down. Some seriously weird stuff for a dude to imagine. Is it possible for a guy to work so hard that he hallucinates his junk into the Twilight Zone? And replaces it with a pair of sweater puppies that wouldn’t look out of place on a sixteen-year-old girl?

I wouldn’t have thought so, but… living proof, right?

Raphael arrived around six, as promised, bearing a deep-dish with everything but the kitchen sink; except olives, because he knows I can’t stand ‘em. “You weren’t kidding,” he said. “This is the first time I’ve seen you without face-fuzz since our senior year at Greyson Tech.”

I hadn’t shaved that day. Didn’t have to; my face hasn’t been this smooth since I was twelve. My hair was slicked back and I was wearing a loose pair of sweats, top and bottom, because I didn’t feel like sharing every bit of news with the guy.

We sat at opposite ends of the couch, pizza between us on the old coffee table, facing the television and an old X-Files episode, with the sound on mute. “I was thinking about what you said last night,” he said. “I dunno what happened to you that could’ve caused this—a year ago—but it’s no wonder it messed you up so bad. Any guy would be bent out of shape if he lost his equipment.”

“You got that right.”

“Sure. And then there’s hormones, right? Without testosterone, it’s no wonder you hardly have to shave. You probably got less body hair too.”

[Now why didn’t I think of that?]

“I hear it can mess with your mind,” he continued. “Make you feel off balance all the time. That’s why you forget stuff, or it seems like something just happened when actually it’s been that way for awhile. See what I mean?”

He didn’t know the half of it, but I resisted the impulse to lift my shirt. “I’ve been hearing this voice in my head,” I said, between bites of pepperoni, Italian sausage and three types of cheese.

“Jesus. It isn’t telling you to do something bad, is it?” He sounded concerned, which was surprising. We’d never been the touchy-feely sort of friends.

To my shock, I began tearing up. I stuffed in more pizza to mask my reaction. “Nothing like that,” I mumbled. My inner voice seemed more interested in bust measurements than in urging me to hurt myself.

“That’s good. You know, you should probably talk to someone about this. Not just me. Hormone replacement therapy wouldn’t be a bad idea either.”
“I saw the doc yesterday. He mentioned something like that.”

[Not gonna happen, bud. No soup for you!]

“Not just a GP.” Rafe paused. “I’m talking about a shrink.”

“You think I’m crazy?” He wouldn’t be the only one.

“No, no… Just, not quite ‘sane’ either.”

“Sure. Like there’s a happy medium somewhere in-between. A little from column ‘sane’ and a little from column ‘insane’, just to make life interesting.”

“Don’t be like that. It’s for your own good. It’s not like they’re gonna throw you in a padded cell. Stuff’s done on an out-patient basis these days.”

“Look at the expert. What is it you do again?” I knew the guy was a physio. My gray matter wasn’t that far out to lunch.

“I looked it up.”

Couldn’t blame him for that. “I’ll think about it.”

[Also not gonna happen. Talk therapy won’t make me go away.]

Rafe was staring again. “You’re hearing it right now, aren’t you? The voice?”

“Yeah, kinda.” I forced myself to swallow. “It say, no shrink for me. And no hormones either. It wants—”

[I didn’t say that. You’ll be getting lots of hormones.]

“It wants me to keep changing,” I said.

He looked worried. “Changing? How do you mean?”

I wiped my fingers on a napkin, then turned to face him. “Like this.” I lifted my sweatshirt. His eyes widened; nearly as big as mine, in fact. So much for my newfound chest not being visible to anyone else. “I need to buy a bra tomorrow,” I said, feeling strangely at peace with the notion. “Maybe a D-cup. These are only Bs at the moment, but they’re on the rise.”

“You don’t have to do that, Em. That growth will all disappear, eventually—as soon as you get testosterone back in your system.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Sure it is! I’ve had clients who are on replacement therapy. One quick injection, once or twice a month, depending on the dosage. It’s easy.”

I shook my head. “It won’t let me.”

“What won’t? That voice? For God’s sake—it isn’t real!”
[You wish. I’m realer than real can be! Whatever that means.]
I covered my face. “No. It’s real… It’s realer than real can be.”
“What the hell does that mean?”
“I don’t know—that’s what it said!”

[You’re not going anywhere. Get rid of this chump.]
“Don’t do that.” I pulled my shirt down. “You better go. Thanks for the pizza and all, but… I need rest, that’s all.” I forced myself to smile. “A girl needs her beauty sleep, right?”

I didn’t have to ask twice; this had to be uncomfortable for Rafe too. “Promise me you’ll talk to your doctor tomorrow. Just ask about hormone therapy, okay? You don’t have to start right away, just get the ball rolling. And get a referral for psychotherapy. It’s just talking, like we’ve been doing.”

I made that promise but, somewhere in the back of my head, some-thing had it’s fingers crossed. No doctors. The lingerie department at Sears, that’s where I’d be getting my advice from now on.

*

As soon as Rafe was out the door, I rolled up my sleeve. It wasn’t just hairless but silky-smooth, just like—my mind shrank from the image—just like Sheila’s skin. My former girlfriend had a flawless complexion; not just her lovely face, but all over. And from the slick feel of these sweats, my skin had to be every bit as denuded as she kept hers.

I kicked off my pants, revealing a slim pair of female legs. Flawless, like they’d never known a stiff little hair in their whole life. Legs crossed at the ankles, feet arched, toes pointed—classic womanly gams. A whimper escaped my lips.

“What are you?” I asked the empty room. My voice vanished into silence. The reply was inside my head. No other living being could have heard it.

[Let me see. How to put this in a way you might understand? Oh, I know. I am a demon of the ancient world, a scourge of fire, a servant of the dark lord—]

“That’s a Balrog,” I said, hugging my bare legs. “You can’t be one of them.” I was pretty sure that a fire demon with fifty-foot wings and a flaming sword wouldn’t fit inside my head.

[You got me there.]
I peered around the room; the now-dark television, the desk, the bookcase. What was I looking for? Whatever this thing was, it certainly wasn’t here. At least not physically. I repeated my question.

[This of it this way, Emmett. Maybe I’m part of you. The part people have been calling ‘Emmie’ all these years.]

A split personality? That would explain a lot—everything except junk that was no longer there, and a perky little bosom that was. Unless these breasts weren’t real either. But Rafe had seen them… unless he too was a figment of my imagination. Maybe I’d been talking to myself all night, and ate the whole pizza to boot. Maybe I was drinking alone in the pub last night. Maybe I should go out and flash a few strangers, just to see what they have to say.

[Not a good plan. Okay, so I’m not part of you. Let’s go back to the demon thing, shall we? No ancient world, no sword of fire, no dark lord, just a plain old fiend from the depths of hell. Which is, by the way, a fairly flat place.]

Demon or not, what had become blindingly obvious was that I couldn’t trust the damn thing. I considered hunting up a priest, but then decided it would be a whole lot of work for nothing. I didn’t believe in a preacher’s ability to exorcise a fiend from hell any more than I believed in hell itself. Plus, I was really tired; it was all my poor legs could do to schlep my body off to the bedroom.

[Rest your pretty little head, Emmie. You’re gonna need it.]

*  

I didn’t want to go to Sears, and I certainly didn’t want to march up to a sales lady and ask for help picking out a brassiere. Yet I found myself doing exactly that, the very next day. I spent the morning online researching bras and lingerie in general, also against my better judgement. I learned the difference between underwire and full support, demi and shelf, padded and push-up. Other bras like the strapless, peephole, and front-closure were pretty self-explanatory, but the corset brassiere seemed like too much of a good thing and the U-bra was just weird. Who needs that much cleavage? (Don’t answer that!)

Joyce, the woman I approached, unwound a measuring tape. She was pushing forty but with a figure any woman would envy, artfully clad in a slimming sheath dress. “Right on the cusp between a B cup and a C cup,” she said, setting the tape aside. “If you don’t mind my asking, are you retaining water at the moment?”

I tried to deny everything and flee the scene, but instead simply shook my head.

[Relax. This is happening whether you like it or not.]
“I recommend the larger size. You can always add a pad, or even a little kleenex to improve the fit. But too small is forever too small.” She led me deeper into the forbidden lingerie zone. “What type of brassiere are you looking for?”

Nothing! I didn’t want any of the damn things, but I couldn’t say that. “I’d like a push-up bra,” I said, far louder than I intended. “But I’ve never worn any of these before, so I’m not sure. One that closes in front might be more user-friendly. What would you suggest?”

She smiled. “Boys do love their cleavage, don’t they?” She touched my shoulder. “You’re not my first, dear. But you’re quite right; a lovely soft-cup with a clasp in front would be easier to manage. Is this for a special occasion?”

Tormented by a demon from hell—is that special enough for you? “Just around the house,” I said, “out and about.” Other women in the area kept looking at me, then glancing away. I pretended to ignore them.

“Women wear different bras for different situations,” Joyce said. “A sports bra, for instance. Or a racer-back, like this, to be worn with a sleeveless garment. Or a strapless brassiere for a gown with no straps. It’s really up to you. A push-up bra would go best with a blouse or dress that has a low-cut neckline.”

“Can I get one of each?” Dumb question.

“Certainly.” I could almost see dollar signs popping out of her head. “Unless you have another brand in mind, I would suggest Maidenform. Their sizes are quite consistent across their entire line, so you need not try them all on.”

“And the soft-cup, for general wear.”

“Of course.” She plucked a beige 34C from the rack, then aimed me toward the dressing rooms. “If you need a hand, do let me know.”

Thankfully, I declined the offer. Inside, I drew the curtain, removed my jacket and stripped to the waist. I hesitated, staring into the mirror. My hair was longer than it had been when I brushed it earlier, that much was obvious. But my face seemed thinner as well. And my waist felt narrower. How could that happen?

[Get with the program, Emmie. Don’t make me get rough.]

The bra was simple enough to put on. I adjusted the shoulder straps and settled the cups on my chest. Then I poked my head out and called Joyce. She broke away from her conversation with another employee. “Those pads you mentioned? I could use a pair, if you don’t mind. And is there a camisole that goes with this?”

To my undying embarrassment, I proceeded to announce my intention to wear the brassiere out of the store. Joyce had no objection. She fetched the items.
“I don’t wanna do this,” I muttered to myself, placing a pad in each cup.

[Tough. You got boobs, so you gotta wear a bra.]

I slipped into a silk cami, followed by my thin sweater—which I could swear was looser than when I put it on at home. “I didn’t ask for the boobs either.”

[Double tough. Be thankful I didn’t give you a voice to match.]

Small mercies. My jacket did little to conceal the twin mounds on my chest. At the checkout, I handed Joyce a credit card in Emmett’s name. She smiled knowingly. “Do come back. Best of luck with your transition.”

I’m not transitioning! That’s what I wanted to say—it’s what I tried to say—but instead I just thanked her and left, like any woman would. I walked out like any woman would too, with my chest jutting out a mile or so, on display for all to see. Curiously, no one seemed to take any notice.

*

I met Rafe for lunch, in the cafe attached to the city art gallery. It was pretentious to the max, with a high ceiling, marble columns, abstract artwork on three walls, and delicate chinaware that I felt obliged to use with pinky finger extended. At my insistence—although I couldn’t fathom why—we took tea. Orange pekoe. And a plate of little pink cookies in the shape of high-heel shoes.

How did I even know about this stuff?

Rafe couldn’t take his eyes off my chest. Men. It’s like they’ve never seen breasts before and their full concentration is necessary to figure out what the darn things are. Still, it isn’t polite to stare at a lady—and I told him so, in no uncertain terms. Out loud. Really loud.

“But—you aren’t a lady,” he said, looking like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. And then slapped upside the head.

“What difference does that make? Boobs are boobs.”

He stared at the table. “Last night they were just… swellings. On a guy’s chest. Now they’re boobs? And you’re wearing a bra? What’s going on?”

“It’s a Maidenform soft-cup,” I said, with an odd hint of pride in my voice, “with a clasp in the front, so it’s easier to put on. It’s my first bra,” I added.

“No kidding. Did you call your doctor?”

“Check this out.” I opened the shopping bag. “This one’s a sports bra. Very tight, so we can still play racquetball next week.” I pulled another out. “This is a racer-
back. See how the straps criss-cross? That’s so they stay under wraps when you’re wearing something sleeveless. Cool, huh? Oh, and this strapless bra is for wearing with—duh—a dress with no straps.”

Rafe was open-mouthed. He appeared to be in shock, although I don’t know why he’d want to react that way. They’re just underwear.

I held up the last item. “Here’s the crown jewel. This little beauty is a push-up bra. You know what that’s for, right? Wink, wink. Cleavage to the max. Of course you need something with a low-cut neckline, otherwise there’s no point. Maybe a nice silk blouse, or a little black cocktail dress. Can’t wait for one of those.”

“Dammit, Em. I didn’t come here for a lecture on ladies wear.”

I folded the bras back into the bag. “No need to be so mean about it.”

“Last night you were all bent out of shape about these… things. Now you’re out buying lingerie and treating them like part of your body.”

“They are part of my body.”

“They are not!” He pointed at my chest. “That only exists ‘cause you haven’t got enough juice in your system, since losing your—”

“I told you—up until yesterday, I had a dick!” That was maybe a little loud. Rafe propped himself on the table, head in his hands. I glanced around the room. It was half full and they were all staring. Most of them.

[A little louder. I don’t think the cook heard you.]

Rafe sighed. “Fine. It doesn’t matter. The point is, we have to get—”

“Doesn’t matter?” I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “Look at me. My hair is longer, my face is thinner. I’ve got legs that could sell pantyhose. And to top it all off, I’m growing tits. How can that not matter?”

“Jeez, you’re all over the map. One minute you’re showing off your new bra, the next you’re moaning about it. What the hell’s going on?”

I had to think about it. “I dunno. Buying bras just seemed like the reasonable thing to do. It’s just underwear.”

“Not for guys, it isn’t. You are still a guy, aren’t you?” I thought about that too, then admitted to being unsure. Rafe stared. “How can you not know? Look, Em, if you’re transitioning…” He paused to let that sink in. “It’s okay to tell me. This is the twenty-first century. I won’t freak out.”

Was I? Isn’t that something one does on purpose, after consulting a doctor? Is it possible to turn into a woman without actually intending to—spontaneously?
[Oh, go ahead. Tell him. Not like it’s gonna matter.]

My shoulders slumped. Now it was my face in my hands. “Oh, God… it’s not me, Rafe. There’s a demon in my head. It’s doing this.”

“A demon. You mean that voice?”

I rubbed my eyes. “It said it was a Balrog.”

“The huge flaming monster that took out Gandalf—that Balrog?”

“I didn’t say I believed him. He backed off the Balrog stuff, but he still says he’s a plain old fiend from the depths of hell.”

“A plain old—” Rafe lowered his own voice. “Do you hear yourself? If this was a hospital you’d be wearing a straight jacket by now.”

“I know it sounds crazy.” I pointed at my head. “But there’s something in here. Some-thing that shouldn’t be there. And it’s got powers.”

“You mean like it can leap tall buildings in a single bound?”

“No. Like it can snap its fingers and make your junk go bye-bye.”

He shook his head. “Might be of some help fighting crime, I suppose.”

“Laugh if you want. Parts of me are gone, and other stuff is appearing.” I glanced at my chest. “They’re bigger than they were yesterday, you know. Even if you don’t count the inserts. God knows where it stops.”

“Inserts? Why would you add anything? If this bugs you so much, why not get a bra that flattens your chest?”

“I don’t know.” I avoided his gaze. “It isn’t just my body changing. It’s affecting my mind as well.”

“We need to get you to a hospital.”

[Not a chance, broski. Emmie has shopping to do.]

I shook my head. “I have shopping to do.”

“Who’s in charge, you or the Balrog? You don’t have to do everything it says!”

A smile crossed my lips. “It isn’t a Balrog. But yeah—I do. I’m going shopping. For a little black dress. Wanna come along?”

His eyes widened. “Is that you talking, or the thing in your head?”

To tell the truth, it was getting hard to tell.

*
Hold up. I got stuff to do.

I stopped short of the main entrance to Nordstrom and pretended to window shop. Rafe wasn’t with me; he had patients to patronize. Moreover, from his point of view, I had to be nothing short of jackass crazy. Whaddya do with a problem like Emmett? Leave him be. Maybe he’ll get better all on his lonesome.

My hips twitched. A wave of nausea flooded through the area between my gut and the business end of my large intestine; but thankfully, nothing nasty came out. The pants tightened around my hips, while the waist seemed to get looser. Needless to say, it wasn’t my pants that were changing. It was me.

Another wave of nausea hit. Feeling light-headed, I leaned against the glass. My skull throbbed. It felt normal afterwards but that didn’t prove much. Each series of changes could be deceivingly subtle, at least to the casual observer. I took a deep breath, shook the hair from my eyes and entered the store.

My measurements had changed; still 34C up top, but 26–34 down below. Size six or eight, according to Bethany, my second salesgirl of the day. Like Joyce, she too treated me as a female customer from the get-go, although here I could sense no undertone of knowing who I really was. Perhaps my new figure was that much more convincing, or maybe it was the latest round of alterations to my face. My hair was longer, that much I knew; I had to keep tucking it behind my ears.

“You came to the right place,” she said, escorting me deeper into women’s wear. “Little black dresses have a special section all to themselves.”

Part of me was terrified; it wanted to crawl under the nearest rack of floor-length gowns and hide. But that part wasn’t in charge of my feet, or my voice. “I’d like a nice sheath,” I said, upon arriving amongst what must have been an acre of black dresses. “Empire waist, cap sleeves, zip up the back.”

Bethany smiled. “A woman who knows what she wants. I like that. We don’t get enough of you in here, let me tell you.” She moved down the rack. “Puckered knit sheath.” She lifted the dress for inspection. “A store exclusive. The textured fabric creates a rippling pattern throughout. Princess seams. Very flattering.”

“The neckline is too round,” I found myself saying. “I just bought a push-up bra. What about the same dress with a scoop, or even a V-neck.”

“We have something similar. It might be a bit shorter, if that’s okay.”

Definitely not okay, according to one small part of me. But all I said was, “More than okay. My legs are a feature.”

We moved to another rack. “Must be a special occasion,” Bethany mused.
“The BF’s been a good boy lately,” I said, flashing a quick smile. “He’s earned a
glimpse of the goods.”

“Mmm. This should do the trick.” Another dress slid from the rack. “Jersey knit
sheath with a gathered tie on the side. You’ve got the waist for it. Scoop neckline.
Would you care to try it on?”

Apparently, I did. Two minutes later I was shucking my clothes in a change room.
I wasn’t wearing panties, but the half-slip I’d borrowed from Bethany was enough
to smooth out the bumps of my tighty-whities. I stepped through the back of the
dress and wiggled it over my hips, then slid my arms into the sleeves and worked
the zipper up my back—a feeling not to be forgotten.

I stood, staring into the mirror. A woman stared back. Her hair was a mess and her
legs were bare, but other than that… “I don’t want this,” I hissed at my image.

[**Tough luck. I like the look. Guess who’s gonna win?**]

“But it isn’t *me,*” I said in a meek voice.

[**Oh, boo-hoo. You aren’t gonna tell me you’re still a guy, are you? Checked out a
mirror lately? Is there a dick under that skirt? Didn’t think so.**]

I swallowed hard, drew the curtain and went to find Bethany. “Please excuse the
rest of me,” I said, posing before another mirror. “I promised myself I’d hit the
salon before my big night.”

“No worries. We don’t usually get to see the finished product.” She moved from
one side to the other. “How does it feel?”

**Awful.** “Fabulous. I love the bodice.”

“The fit is perfect. It’ll look better with the push-up, of course.” We shared a
knowing smile, although I wasn’t sure what it was I was supposed to *know.*

That’s when Raphael arrived. Ladies wear seemed to part before him, like a giant
striding through the sea. He’s six-three, way taller than me and everyone else in
the vicinity. He was trailed by another man; shorter and sporting a neatly trimmed
black beard. The calvary, one would assume.

Rafe stopped dead when he spotted me. The guy with the beard bumped into him
from behind. I did a quick little curtsy as they approached, like you do when
you’re just messing around, and chirped, “Hey, sailor. Like what you see?” My
voice did seem to have taken on a more female tone, but whether that was due to a
physical change in my throat or just a more feminine cadence, I had no idea.
knowing the demon in my head, probably both.

Rafe seemed to be in shock. “Em? Is that—? Jeez, I can barely tell it’s you.”
“Thanks, I guess. Hey, you’ve never seen me in a dress before, have you? See the
gathered tie at the side? It shows off my figure rather nicely, don’t you think? And
yes, I have dropped a few pounds, thanks muchly.”

The beard nuded Rafe. “You sure this is the… ‘person’ you told me about?”

“He didn’t look like that before.”

“Excuse me?” I smoothed down the front of the dress, all the way into my groin.
“We look like a ‘he’ to you?” Bethany had discretely faded into the background.
I noticed her lurking in the doorway to the changing area. Clever girl; my clothes
were in there, including wallet and other valuables, thus ensuring that I wouldn’t
amscray with the dress. At least, I wouldn’t; the demon in my head was capable of
anything. It stole my junk, so why not a dress?

The beard turned to Rafe. “Dude, anyone can tell she’s a girl.”

“I told you about his junk, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. You also told me he had it removed, a year ago.”

Rafe’s voice got louder. “So what? This is him. What’s your problem?”

“If she’s transitioning, I got no problem with that.”

“He’s not transitioning! He’s got a voice in his head.” Rafe pointed at the side of
his own head. “It tells him to do stuff. That’s why he’s acting like a chick.”

The beard turned to me. “Name’s Jackson. I work with your friend here.”

“He moonlights at the hospital as an EMT,” Rafe said. “I asked him to take a look.
We can have an ambulance here in five—”

“Let’s not go there, huh?” Jackson faced me. “Miss, if you don’t mind my asking,
is there a voice in your head telling you to act like a woman?”

[I’m gonna say ‘no’. And so are you.]

I wrinkled my nose. “That’s silly. What would be the point? I don’t need anyone
to tell me to be who I already am.”

“That’s not what he said last night!” Rafe cried. “He told me there was a demon in
his head, like a Balrog or—”

Jackson raised his hand. “Hang on. A Balrog? Like in Lord of the Rings?”

“Yeah, like that. I didn’t believe it either. That’s why he backed off and just called
it a plain old fiend from the depths of hell.”

“You’re not makin’ a whole lotta sense, dude.” Back to me. “Ma’am, beggin’ your
pardon but is there a giant Balrog in your head? Is it perhaps trying to stop you from tossing your jewelry into a nearby volcano?"

I managed a giggle. “Certainly not, sir. I believe I would know if there were.”

Back to Rafe. “She seems fine to me. That’s what you wanted to know, right?” He sighed. “Look, if this is your friend, she’s obviously pretty far along. Maybe you should just leave her alone. Let her be a woman.”

[Smart man. He’ll go far in this business.]

Jackson left. Rafe looked at me sadly. “Is this what you want?”

“Of course it is, silly. But you still haven’t told me—how do I look?” I returned to posing in front of the mirror. “But before you answer, imagine me in pantyhose and heels, with my hair done and my face fixed. Now, whaddya see?”

Rafe said, “I’m not giving up on Emmett.” Then he too left.

*

By the time I got home I could barely carry all the stuff I’d bought. Brassieres and other lingerie, the jersey-knit sheath, three pairs of high heels, a full makeup kit, and a hodgepodge of skirts and blouses. Everything for the aspiring cross-dresser.

Not that the demon and I were on the same page. Far from it. Several times on my way through downtown I tried to throw the bags away, drop them in an alley or a trashcan, but they stubbornly refused to leave my hand. In my bedroom I made space in my dresser and in my closet, lovingly folding or hanging each item as if it was my most precious possession.

Fat chance of that. Women’s clothing meant nothing to me.

I lay on the couch, hands over my face, trying and failing to die of embarrassment. Every step of the way, from being fitted for lingerie to discussing the best shade of nylon to show off the shape of my legs, brought me that much closer to death by a thousand humiliations. Why? Why was this happening?

[You ask too many questions. Sit back and enjoy the ride.]

My arms fell to my sides. I stared up at the ceiling. The worst part might’ve been the extended discussion at the Cosmetics counter about whether my complexion made me a ‘Winter’ or an ‘Autumn’. Three salesgirls took part, and they tried out several different foundation/blush combinations before settling. It turns out the high contrast between my hair and skin makes me a Winter—who knew?

[Me, that’s who. But some things you have to find out for yourself.]
“You aren’t a Balrog,” I said out loud. “And I don’t believe hell is any realer than Middle Earth. Where did you come from? And why me?”

The room was silent. Then another thought trickled up from the hidden depths of my consciousness. Why not me? I was small for a guy; a lot smaller than men like Rafe and bossman Brett. Five-eight and never more than one-fifty pounds, and that was before I got fitter after college—not to mention the waist shrinkage from earlier that day. Even Sheila was a full three inches taller, which might have even contributed to the break-up. She never mentioned it, but the way she looked down at me, at times, made it clear she found the situation uncomfortable.

Can’t blame her for that. I remembered going through my mother’s closet when I was younger, and is that something a regular guy would do? Huh… Been a long time since I thought about that. If ever. But I must have… I could recall every last detail, right down to which of her shoes fit me and which dress was my favorite: a black cocktail gown with three-quarter sleeves, a cowl neckline and a flared knee-length skirt, and it fit me better than anything ever had—provided I wore a full-support girdle and a silk slip over that. What a feeling!

So—why not me? Maybe I was meant to be a woman all along. Maybe there was no voice in my head after all; just me and my subconscious mind, working things out as best we could. Maybe my genitalia had been lopped off a year ago, just like everyone said. An image floated into my head: me speaking with a surgeon in his office. “You don’t have to tell me, doc. I know it’s a big step. But I’m a woman on the inside—I’ve always known that, deep down—and this is what I want.” And he stepped me through the procedure, the incisions he would make, what bits would be removed and what would be saved to create… a vagina.

My fingers probed between my legs. Even through the fabric of my jeans I could tell there was something there; a slight parting of the flesh, a hint that there might be some kind of opening there after all. Had I missed it before? I didn’t dare look. I closed my eyes, trying to relax. It was all terribly confusing.

* 

Saturday morning. I couldn’t wait any longer. My body was changing, whether I wanted it to or not, and certain things had to be done. So I slicked back my hair, put on a loose sweatshirt—to conceal the terrifying extent of my development—and went to see the building manager.

Frederick Granger stared at me myopically. He wore the thickest glasses known to man, although not at that particular moment, so he probably couldn’t see me very well. “Do I have this right? You’re turning into a woman?”
“Sort of. I’m female on the inside, so I’m just making the outside reflect what’s on the inside, if that makes any sense.” I tried to make myself look small, seated primly on the dusty old leather couch in his office.

“I must say, you do appear rather—feminine, if that’s the right word. Funny thing not to have noticed before. I suppose we see what we expect to see, eh?”

[So true. Makes my job a lot easier.]

“I thought I should mention it, in case you started wondering about the strange woman going in and out of my apartment.”

“Yes, of course…” He searched through his files, chuckling to himself. “Not too strange, I trust. We’re all respectable folks around here.”

I considered telling him where he could stuff his ‘respect’, but decided instead to defer to the male. “Less strange, I’d say. If you think about it right. Instead of an odd little man, you’ll have an attractive career woman looking to get ahead in the world—in a ‘breaking the glass ceiling’ sort of way.”

“A feminist. Of course.” He opening a folder and poised his pen over the page. “Does the career woman have a name?”

Good question. Did I? “Monique. No change in surname.” Apparently I did, which was interesting because I’d never given it a moment’s thought. The name just popped into my head, same as a lot of other things of late.

“Lovely.” He wrote it down. “Do let me know when it becomes official. Then we can make the necessary changes to the rental agreement.”

“I’ve already had surgery,” I blurted out. “I’ve been growing my hair out too. And buying clothes. Next week I’ll talk to a lawyer about the name change.”

He closed the file. “Sounds like someone’s in a hurry.”

“I’ve been waiting for this my whole life. So the next time you see me…”

He smiled. “Monique it is. And so it shall be, forevermore.”

[How profound. Out of the mouths of old fat guys.]

*

I spent the afternoon wearing a skirt and blouse, studying feminine deportment. I watched countless YouTube videos on how to walk and talk and dress myself as a woman, and when had I ever done that? Before long, walking and talking like a woman felt like second nature. Still, it was hard to shake the feeling that doing all this should bother me more than it did.
On the other hand... I’d been cross-dressing, off and on, for pretty near my whole life—hadn’t I? So why bother with all this how-to stuff? Did I really need it?

The memories kept coming. The time I first kissed a boy; Billy Hendry from down the block, and it was gross. My first makeout session; in the back of a late-model Ford Thunderbird, with that Todd boy who was so full of himself, but he had *such* a cool car! Why else would I let him get to second base? My first bra, my first period, my first makeover, the fitting session for my prom gown—which was weird because I also remembered being decked out in a tux.

A lengthy bubble bath was spent recalling the juicy details of my ‘first time ever’. It was the night of my senior prom, spent in a motel with none other than Juanito Viteri, the new student every girl in school was chrrushing on. And I was *la niña bonita* who bagged him! Or maybe he bagged me. Whatever.

I stared up at the ceiling, cloaked in bubbles, remembering the feel of strong hands caressing my breasts, while idly stroking the crevasse between my legs. *Mmm...* Come to think, wasn’t Becca Angström my date that night? But why would I go to the prom with a *girl*? I’m no lezzie—not that it’s wrong or anything. I’m just not into chicks. Dudes all the way; the bigger the better.

Hang on, that couldn’t be right. What about Sheila?

I gave up. The past is passed; time to accept who I am. Like Popeye says, “I yam what I yam.” But maybe he was just expressing a fondness for sweet potatoes.

Monique was my mother’s middle name. She’d always wanted a girl.

*“You are lucky to get in, *chiquita*. We do not get so many cancellations.”*

I glanced down the line of salon chairs. All ocupado, all busy. “I hear that. The joint is jumping. Is it always like this?”

“On weekends, for sure.” That was Juanita, the stylist for my very first visit to a beauty parlor, who could’ve been Juanito’s sister. Yet—how could it be my first visit? I’d had my hair done lots of times before. Hadn’t I?

“My lucky day,” I said, sliding into the chair. “Got a big date. I really need this.”

She ran her fingers through thick hair that now fell to my shoulder blades. “Hmm. I think it must be a long time since your last styling.”

“I’m kind of a tomboy. Saddle up a pony and I’m out the door.”

*[Not anymore, *chiquita*.*]
“Everyone is different. Some girls we see every week; others, not so much.” She put her hands on my shoulders. “I make you look nice for your big date, yes?”

“Please do. Loose waves and a big old blowout.” Panic rose within me, although my face remained placid. What on earth was a blowout, and why would I want one? It sounded more like what happens to a badly sealed oil well.

Juanita looked pleased. “Bueno—you know what you want. Most girls, they show me a picture of some actress or model and say, ‘I want to look like her.’ But I am not a miracle worker—no ángel hermoso, you see, sent from heaven to turn them into the woman they dream of being.”

“Beautiful angel,” I murmured.

“Sí. But this hair—it is our pride, no?” She wrapped a towel around my neck, then entrapped me in her net. The cape concealed my skirt, which only emphasized the nylon-clad legs that stuck out below. “Very nice hair. Easy to work with. Many of my clients would envy such hair.”

“I can’t take much credit.” How true that was!

“It is a gift from God, to be sure. Perhaps it is blasphemy to think it could look any better, yes?” Her comb flowed through my hair. “But then I would be out of a job. So we shall proceed and trust that God will understand.”

“Beauty is there already,” I said. “You’re just making it visible.”

She laughed. “As lovely as you are wise. Your young man is perhaps luckier than he knows. Ah—perhaps that is him now?”

The entrance was behind me, but a glance in the mirror showed Rafe standing in the doorway, gazing at me, phone in his hand. I reached for my purse. His text was only four words long: We nEd 2 TLK.

I texted back: Busy! Don’t MbR$ me.

He sent I’ll W8, then sat down and picked up a ragged fashion mag.

Juanita set to work, gently releasing the knots in my hair. “He is cute. A big boy. Very tall. Tu amante?”

“Tall is good, but it’s too soon to tell. I’ll see how the date goes.”

“Tall is good, yes. In itself and also for what it may… suggest.” At length, she put the comb aside and took a brush to my hair, noting in passing that it all seemed to be the same length and was that by choice? It was not. “Layers would perhaps be more flattering. These would soften the line of your jaw and draw more attention to your pretty face. It is also a good way to add volume and movement.”
I told her to do whatever she thought best. Did I have a choice?

[You don’t, but you should get used to thinking you do. I’ll work on that.]

Juanita proceeded with the cut; sectioning and trimming my hair, followed by a quick wash and a rough dry. With a round brush and a warm blower she dried one tress at a time, working out from the scalp. She added finishing spray and worked it through my hair with her fingers, pushing upward to build bounce.

“Buenas noches, Monique,” she said, as I was leaving, “y mucho amor.”

I wanted to tell her that in spite of my new hairdo and my new dress and my push-up bra, and the fancy perfume I bought on my way over, there was no ‘big date’ in my future and Rafe was just a concerned citizen who wanted to strap me into the nearest straight jacket. But all that came out was, “Tall is good.”

She smiled and I blushed. I’m the sort of girl who does that.

*

“I want to apologize,” Rafe said, after he’d bought me a pumpkin spice latte and settled us into a booth in the corner of the cafe.

“No need,” I said, wrapping my lips around the straw.

“There is. I was being selfish, thinking about myself.” He stirred his Americano. “I didn’t want to lose you. Emmett, I mean. As a friend.”

“We’re still friends.” Staring at him, I sucked on the straw.

“I know. It took me awhile to figure that out.”

“No worries.” My fingers folded around the cup. The nails were longer than I remembered, and they were painted pink. When did that happen?

“I was thinking how it must’ve been for you—back when you got the surgery. If there was an accident you would’ve told me about it, right? So it must’ve been your choice, to become a woman.” Sotto voce so no one else could hear. “It’s what you wanted all along. I’m sorry I didn’t figure that out sooner.”

I sighed. “How do you square that with what I told you before?”

“All that ‘voice in your head’ stuff? Sorry, Em. It never made much sense. You’re not that crazy. Oop—what I meant was, you’re not crazy.”

I shook my head, feeling the pull of all that hair against my neck. What was the point of telling the truth? If my best friend didn’t believe me then no one would—like, ever. Some things you have to face on your own.
“It’s too bad you had to hide it from everyone. Must’ve been so frustrating, yeah? The surgery’s done, you’re on estrogen, your figure’s changing and your chest is, uhm… Yet the whole time you keep up this pretense you’re still a guy.”

“Rafe… what did I show you back at the pub? Scorched earth, that’s what—there was nothing there! Why would I do that? If I wanted—” I lowered my voice. “If I was planning to be female, don’t you think I’d keep… more of it?”

He stared at me, eyes unfocused, obviously lost.

“If I showed you the same area right now, know what you’d find?” I leaned closer. “Lady bits, that’s what. A love tunnel. I have no idea how far in it goes. Deeper than I can reach, for sure. How do ya think that got there?”

His gaze fell. He appeared to be looking for guidance in the dregs of his coffee. Then he shrugged. “Didn’t look close enough, I guess. If you have ‘one of those’ now, it must’ve come from the surgery. I mean, where else?”

“You’re never gonna believe me, are you?”

“I’m your friend, Em. You don’t have to pretend anymore.” He looked me in the eye. “I accept you as a woman.” Touching, I suppose, in its own way, however misguided. “It’s out in the open now,” he added. “That’s the important thing.”

“Sure. Now I can—” Again, I found myself on the verge of weeping, only not for the reason most people would think. “I can be the woman I was meant to be.”

“Of course you can! You’re gonna be one hell of a woman, you’ll see. In fact, you already are.” He slapped the table. “I’m serious. You’re smart, and you care about people, and you’re a great listener—and when I saw you wearing that dress in the store… Well—I couldn’t believe it was you. I mean, your figure… and, uhm, your hair looks pretty nice too. It really does. I’m not just sayin’ that.”

Oh, God… A girl could kiss a guy like that. Not me, of course. I wasn’t that gone, at least not yet. And as I firmly reminded myself—Rafe had a girlfriend.

Bad enough to be turned into a woman; it would be that much worse to turn into ‘the other woman’ as well. I had no intention of screwing up my best friend’s life as badly as mine had been. Apparently, I’m not that kind of girl.

* 

Monday morning. Time to face the music at my place of work. I strolled into Brett Corrigan’s office wearing a pink blouse and a black midi skirt, a patterned bolero jacket from Metrostyle, and wedge sandals with ankle straps. Ankle straps are sort of like training wheels for heels. I’m new at this, so why take chances?
Brett couldn’t quite grasp who I was, at least until I flashed my ID card and reminded him what my duties were on the current project.

“Emmett? Jesus. You look…” His voice trailed off into a long and uncomfortable stare.

“You were right,” I said. “About what you said last week. I’m transitioning.”

“Oh, yeah. You pretty much already have, by the looks of things.”

I told him I’d had the surgery last year, but kept the changes under wraps until I was ready to take it full-time. The lie came so easily to my lips, I was tempted to believe it myself. And why not? My life would make a whole lot more sense that way.

[That’s the spirit. Believe because you want to, not because I made you.]

“You can call me ‘Monique’, by the way. It isn’t all nice and legal yet, but I’ll get the ball rolling on that asap.”

“Yeah, sure. Uh… since you’re here, I’m gonna guess you want your job back.”

I flashed him a smile. “Nice try, Brett. I don’t recall ever losing my job, so unless you plan on firing me just because I’m a woman…”

“Grounds for a lawsuit? Hell, no. Can’t have that, no siree Bob.”

“It’s not like I’m the only girl around here.” I swept to my feet, feeling utterly at ease in skirt and heels. “Shall I return to my desk?”

“Uhm… gimme a day or two, huh? Just so I can talk to my boss and tell the team. Get them used to the idea before they see you.”

“Whatev.” I ‘ta-ta’ed the man and left.
Turns out you can’t just waltz into a lawyer’s office and have him swap your boy-name for a girl-name. Not when you’re already female, and insofar as anyone can tell have been that way since day one. Luckily, my fingerprints were still on file from a summer job with the federal government, some years prior, so he booked me for a repeat inking to verify my identity. Hard to imagine a girl going to that much trouble to steal some poor shmoe’s hard-earned debt, but you can’t be too careful.

I spent some quality time in Bloomingdale’s and scored two more outfits—skirts, blouses and a thoroughly professional tweed blazer from Ann Taylor. I was set on being taken seriously, and I wouldn’t want the boys to see me in the same outfit twice in the same week. Female electrical engineers may not grow on trees, but we’re smart and we’re proud, and we got the style to match.

Towards evening I wandered down to the lake, although not into the park, parts of which were a bit too secluded for a young lady on her own. Instead, I headed for a stretch of grassy bluff and a certain bench with a high view over the water. One of my all-time fav places. It held many memories, most of them quite nice.

And that’s where he found me. “For Valentine’s Day.”

It was a man’s voice; familiar, and yet not. I turned to see. He was holding a single red rose. Suddenly, the world made a lot more sense. He could’ve been Sheila’s twin brother, only Sheila had no brother, twin or otherwise. You do the math.

I stared at him. “You did this to me.” I might never know the how of what had been done—magic doesn’t readily lend itself to inspection—but I knew the who and could make a pretty fair guess as to the why.

He didn’t deny it. In fact, he looked rather proud of himself. “You look amazing,” he said, stepping around the bench. He offered me the rose.

I accepted and held it in my lap. “You’re a bit late.”

“Close enough. Mind if I sit?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I was referring to last year.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry about that.” He flashed me that lopsided grin I knew so well; so near and dear as to melt my heart, yet so strange to see on a male face.

I gazed down at the flower. It was in full bloom; a deep, bittersweet red with petals artfully arranged around the bud. The female part, I knew, was deep down in the middle. Sort of like me; female at heart. Maybe that was the message. “It tore me apart,” I said, almost too softly to hear.
“I know. I’m sorry.” His voice was hoarse.

“Is this why? This—?” I gestured at his body.

“I couldn’t be the person you wanted me to be. I did try.”

“I blamed myself, you know.” Silence. “I wasn’t good enough.”

His shoulders sagged. “You wouldn’t have believed me. ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’ That’s the oldest, lamest excuse in the book.”

More silence. I took a deep breath, hoping tears weren’t on the way. It felt like being underwater, only drowning wasn’t an option. Part of me wished it was. “So you turned me into a woman. Dare I ask how you did it?”

“There’s this old lady back home. Friend of the family. She—we don’t call her a ‘witch’; she hates that. She just… knows how to do stuff.”

Stuff. That covers an awful lot of ground. Another deep breath. “So the old lady whipped up a batch of sex-change potion and you slipped it into my morning latte. And drank the rest yourself.”

“She doesn’t do potions. It was a spell; a very complicated incantation. It took me the better part of six months to get the darn thing just right.”

“She didn’t just wave her magic wand and—poof—instant Balrog?”

“She doesn’t own a wand, magic or otherwise. She’s got this old cane of black ironwood she uses to get around, but it’s not magic. I had to cast the spell myself because—it was a love spell, okay? That’s how it works.”

My grip tightened on the rose. “I was already in love. You didn’t need—”

“I know. It was the only spell that did what I wanted.”

“What you wanted?” I almost choked. “You have no idea what I’ve been through, the last few days. This thing in my head—”

[Hey... I thought we were getting along so well.]

He touched my arm. “I’ve got one too.”

“You knew what it was.” I stared out to where the sun was getting ready to lower itself into the lake. “It’s not a Balrog,” I said. Please, let it not be a Balrog.

“Nope. Tolkein wrote fiction, you know.”

“So what is it? Cupid?” Love spell, Valentine’s Day; it made a certain weird sense.

“Uh, no. That’s just a fairy tale.”

“The voice in my head isn’t a fairy tale. It’s driving me crazy.”
“Yeah, they do that. As for the Balrog thing, according to Mrs. Glenwoggen they do sort of look like that. Maybe Tolkein had one in his head too, for awhile. Or the artist who worked on the movie. They get around.”

“I can’t deal with a Balrog the rest of my life.”

“No worries. It’ll leave as soon as the spell is complete.”

*Complete?* “I’m already a woman—from this gorgeous head of hair to the tips of my little toenails, and all the lady bits in-between. How much more ‘complete’ can a girl get?”

“You’ll know when it hits you.”

“Uh-huh… Is it gonna hurt?”

“It won’t. I promise.” There was that smile again. Be still, my aching heart.

*[Me too. I might look like a Balrog, but I lacks the bad attitude.]*

I sniffed at the rose and tucked it into my hair. “So—is *that* where my junk ended up?” I crooked a finger in the general direction of his lap.

“Not exactly. The spell doesn’t just swap things around. This is what I would’ve been if I’d been born male.”

“Let me guess. Yours is bigger than mine ever was, and mine—” I leaned back. “—are a wee bit more impressive than yours were. Is that how this works?”

“Pretty much.”

“So you’re a better man than I was, and I’m more of a woman than you could’ve ever been. So all’s right with the world.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘better’, but DNA don’t lie. We are who we should’ve been.”

Who was I to argue? I remembered wearing my mother’s wig, her black cocktail dress with the hip-pleat skirt, and a sweet pair of slingbacks. Who does *that*, other than a boy destined to follow in Mom’s footsteps when he grew up? Of course, I had no idea whether memories like that were real or implanted by the creature in my head—but did it really matter anymore? Like it or not, I was female.

I shivered a little and crossed my arms, feeling goosebumps. The air was cooling. The BF slid over and put his arm around my shoulders. Must be instinct.

I looked up at him. “I don’t even know your name.” He told me, and I smiled. “That fits. Sean Connery or ‘Shaun the Sheep’?”

“Neither. George Bernard Shaw-"n. How about you? Emma or Emily?”

“My name,” I said, precisely, “is Monique.”
“No kidding. That was your Mom’s middle name.”

“It’s mine now, in her honor.” I paused. “That might even be true. Either way, that’s what you tell her—when you fess up about what you did to her little boy.”

“You want me to tell your parents?” He looked dismayed and adorable at the same time. “I guess I owe you that much.”

“Waaay more than that. But it’s a start.” I rested my head on his shoulder. We sat and watched the sunset gleam across shimmering waters. I shivered again and he held me closer. My face lifted. Our lips met… and I melted.

I was in love. Did it matter how I got there? Love is love.

[Looks like we’re done here. Have a nice life, kid.]

I felt what might have been a hot flash, out through the side of my head. The kiss broke and we saw them go: flaming monsters with vast wings, curved horns and claws the size of stray dogs. They drifted out over the lake, like a pair of lost balloons from a Thanksgiving day parade—the one that high-steps it through the deep places of the ancient world.

“No one else can see them,” Shawn said.

“Oh, good. Otherwise some busybody would call the cops and then you wouldn’t be able to take me back to your place, like you’re about to do.”

“Was I? It seems a little soon for—” He shut up when my lips found his. You can’t say something silly with an extra tongue in your mouth. That kiss lasted for quite awhile. Then we watched the two Balrog-like creatures sink slowly into the lake, where they merged with the last light of the sun and were lost to sight.

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

Shawn disagreed. “It’s only just begun.” The twin peaks of my chest grew stiff where they pressed against his body. His lips found mine, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before he reached the gate to the deep places of my womanhood—where I planned to welcome him with open arms, and equally open legs. To that end, we left the bench and hurried back to the city.

When the prize is true love, your junk is a small price to pay. ■
BONUS CAPTION!

Original artwork by the immortal Dan DeCarlo, with thanks and a sincere apology