I slid into Vanessa’s body like it was a silk stocking—and I was a leg utterly devoid of hair. The sensation was literally one of a garment rising up my body, or I descending into it, as smooth as oil on glass. When it finally swallowed my head I experienced a few seconds of disorientation as my brain strained to encompass a flood of new and unfamiliar sensory data. And then: I was her.

My eyes fluttered open, and though the light was dim it took only a moment to recognize my surroundings. I must have seen the photos a thousand times online. It was Vanessa Petrova’s boudoir, with its signature canopied bed, silk curtains and wall hangings depicting the artwork of Leonardo da Vinci. Seemingly of their own accord, my hands rose under the sheet to cup the breasts that now graced my chest—it’s often said that all males do this when they inhabit a woman’s body—marvelling at the weight and fullness of what felt like part of my own body. My thumbs caressed the nipples, sending a definite tingle through my now-female body. But I refrained from taking it any further; plenty of time for that later.

I pulled myself upright, gazing into the deep valley that seemed to cleave my body in two. A soft weight spread across my back and then twin curtains fell into view: the brunette tresses Vanessa wore so well, now gathered atop my chest. I ran a hand around the back of my neck, sending long thick hair spilling over one shoulder.

It was true, it had really happened. I was here.

My intellect knew full well that my body was still sealed inside a VR pod with an IV drip delivering the cocktail of drugs that kept it in a state of indefinite sleep, a feeding tube, siphons to remove waste products, and a neural tap to input data from the virtual world I was now a part of. But every physical sense I possessed told me otherwise; that I was truly here—in a woman’s bedroom, inside a female body—and that was more than enough to overwhelm the theoretical notion that none of this was real. It felt real enough to me.

I pulled the covers aside and gaped at the smooth pair of feminine legs emerging from the hem of the nightgown. I ran my hand down one shapely—and very smooth—thigh, noting the perfectly shaped oval nails that tipped my fingers, still painted fire-engine red from the night before. Perhaps the previous inhabitant of this body had done me a solid, but more likely this was simply the default state of Ms. Petrova’s body. All part of the service.

I swung my legs out of bed and stood. That’s when I realized how much smaller I was. I’d never been in this room before, but certain things are the same size everywhere. Doors, for example; the ones that led to the hallway and the en suite both looked taller than they should, as did the closet. Vanessa was only five-eight, to my former six-foot-two, and it showed. My whole body felt smaller, although between the long hair framing my view, and my newfound breasts, it felt as though I’d gained extra ornamentation on the outside.

They don’t mention stuff like that in the film they make you watch before you enter the pod. I’d never noticed it myself, but then again I’d never been a woman before. Given the quality I could usually afford it had never seemed worthwhile, but winning three days as Vanessa Petrova was too good to pass up.

Was anybody watching right now? Very likely there was. Vanessa was one of the most popular avatars in Cosmopolis, so you had to figure on a total lack of privacy; the virtual camera is invisible. Still, in the here and now, it felt as if I were alone.
I showered, because that seemed like the thing to do, then dressed myself. Vanessa’s walk-in closet was huge, so it took me awhile to settle on a long belted gown and a pair of black t-strap stiletto heels, partly because I’d seen her wear the outfit before. Curiously, when I sat down at the vanity to fix my face—for the first time ever—my fingers seemed to know exactly what to do. I suppose the lady’s operating parameters wouldn’t allow her to walk around looking like a little girl who’d been playing with her mother’s makeup.

I was allowed to choose my own jewelry, so I adorned myself with a pair of weighty earrings and the necklace to match. Then I blow-dry and brushed out my hair until it fairly danced across my shoulders.

I had just emerged from the bedroom and was wondering what the day might bring when the doorbell rang—too much of a coincidence for my liking. Somebody knew what I was doing. “Enchanté, mademoiselle.” Tall, dark and handsome—all wrapped into one—took my hand and kissed it, then stepped past me into the room. He didn’t wait to be invited. I knew him, of course: it was Carsten Thurn, Vanessa’s beau in the virtual world and possibly the second most popular avatar after Vanessa herself.

“Carsten,” I said, after retrieving my hand, “how lovely to see you. Also unexpected. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Unexpected? Have you forgotten, dear one? Our luncheon at the Tropicano, which we agreed upon two weeks ago, no less, and of which I reminded you of only yesterday?”

“Oh, yes… that lunch. It must have slipped my mind.”

He eyed me, looking puzzled. “But you did dress for the occasion, did you not? Could there be some other reason you look like that?”

I felt flustered. “Uh, no. Not at all. That’s why I dressed up.”

“I see.” He smiled. “Then it slipped from your mind between the time you got dressed and when you answered the door. I suppose that can happen, particularly with a vision as lovely as that staring back at you from the mirror. It’s a wonder you got dressed at all.” He offered me his arm. “Shall we go?”

As usual, the Club Tropicano was a beehive of activity. It was the main spot in Cosmopolis to be ‘seen’ by other avatars and the online audience alike, and both Vanessa and Carsten were regulars.

Over lunch Carsten related a witty story about a recent business trip to Paris, which had ended with his client wearing a round cake for a hat while an older woman intoned in mock seriousness, “Let them eat Bundt.” My focus was on maintaining my image as a beautiful woman of high social standing. I was intensely aware not just of my highly feminized figure and the long hair that threatened to make itself part of my Waldorf salad, but—in full knowledge of an audience of millions—my body language as well. I kept adjusting my posture and the way I was eating, while at the same time trying to look properly amused by my date’s repartee. Vanessa was nothing if not an attentive listener. She knew just when to smile and when to drop an amusing comment of her own into the flow, but I had no such confidence in my own abilities. Mostly, I just listened.

With the dishes cleared away, we lingered over a glass of sweet wine for me and a Pabst Blue Ribbon for him. Smiling, he took my hand. “This is lovely—as are you, my dear. But tell me… isn’t part of your girly brain wondering who I really am?”

I blinked in confusion. The prime directive in Cosmopolis is don’t break the fourth wall! In other words, stay in character—so I feigned ignorance. “You’re Carsten Thurn. Who else would you be?”
He leaned closer. “You know what I mean… Simon.”

I gasped. An avatar’s real identity was meant to be a secret, known only to the vendor that had custody of his or her body. How could this customer know? I snatched my hand back.

Carsten chuckled. A sly, almost-familiar grin spread across his face.

“It’s me, you idiot. Madeline. Your girlfriend, remember?”

I shook my head. “No, that’s impossible. It’s—”

Quietly, he described our last evening together two weeks earlier, the harsh words we’d exchanged, the unscheduled trip home she’d made to visit her mother, and a few other things only Madeline was likely to know. “Satisfied?” Carsten returned to his beer.

“I stared at him. “But—how? How did you know it was me? How is it we’re here at the same time? This has to be the most unlike—”

“Oh, please. You didn’t win a contest, Simon. I booked the time and sent it to you anonymously. Cost me a pretty penny too, for both of us. I had to borrow most of the cash from my Mom.” He shrugged. “Hopefully it’ll be worth it.”

I glanced around. “I’m not sure we should be talking about this. Do you have any idea how many people are watching right now?”

“Who cares? They can’t hear us. You know how this works. When people are talking they pull back to give the customers some privacy.” He laughed. “None for the physical stuff, of course, but small talk is privileged information. They even blur the character’s mouths, so lip readers can’t eavesdrop. It doesn’t affect what you and I see, but the bottom line is we can speak freely.”

“All right, Maddie. I’ll bite. What are you doing here? Why did you want to give me—this?” I glanced down at Vanessa’s body.

Carsten jabbed a finger at me. “You have to ask? You’ve been totally fixated on this woman for months; years, for all I know. I figured it might do you some good to see what it’s like to be her.”

I bit my lip. I couldn’t deny it. “I’m sorry. I know that must look. But this has nothing to do with you, Maddie. It’s just that—”

He waved me off. “I’m not mad at you, Simon. Well, not anymore. I mean, look at her.” He spread his hands. “She’s gorgeous. What real girl could compete? Of course, she’s not real—but I know you know that. I’m not here to belabor the obvious.”

I let my breath out. “So why are you here? To keep an eye on me?”

He looked sheepish. “I guess so. Wouldn’t you? You think I want to sit back and watch—literally watch online—while some stranger in this body got busy with you? You’re still my boyfriend, even if you do happen to be a beautiful woman at the moment.”

I caressed the stem of my wine glass. “Fair enough.”

He leaned forward. “One more thing. This may sound trite, but as a man you just don’t ‘get’ what women have to go through these days. I know, it’s the middle of the twenty-first century and all, but we’re still second-class citizens in a lot of ways. You’re a sweet guy, but I think being a woman for awhile might do you some good.”

I rolled my eyes. “You think being a rich socialite is gonna teach me what life is like for regular gals like you?” He grunted. “Yeah, well… I would’ve turned you into a receptionist in an office full of ass-grabbing lawyers, but I didn’t think you’d go for it.”

I couldn’t help it: I laughed out loud, and after a moment Carsten did too. “Guess again,” I replied, flashing him a coy smile.
Everybody who watched Cosmopolis knew that Carsten Thurn was a playboy, with a taste for the high life that included fast women and faster cars. But it’s one thing to see it on-screen and quite another to be the fast woman and to feel yourself pressed into the leather upholstery of a Porsche Boxster as it took the curves around the lake at speeds that would’ve left us sucking water in real life. Madeline seemed intent on getting her money’s worth.

Carsten parked the car and we strolled out to a viewpoint where only a thin metal railing separated us from a hundred-foot drop into Lake Ladybird. It was a perfect scene, with a cool breeze sifting through my hair and sunlight dappling the water below. Again I found myself wondering how many eyeballs were focused on me.

I felt his arm encircle my waist. “This is nice,” he said. “I can see why people like coming here.” I wasn’t sure if he meant the view or Cosmopolis itself. He leaned closer. “Listen. Maddie really is sorry, you know. About that little spat they had. Simon’s a good guy, and hey she probably expects too much. But that’s her problem.”

I gazed up at him, shaking my head. “It’s not too much. She’s a great girl, she really is. She deserves the best.” “She’s got the best,” he said. Then he kissed me. My hands pressed against his chest, almost as though to push him away. But then our lips changed position, we each took a breath and my arms slipped around his waist. His own arms encircled my back, drawing us together. His fingers cradled the back of my head. With my eyes closed, I gave myself to him—the way a woman does—clutching at his shoulder blades with both hands.

This went on for some time. I imagined how it might look on-screen, with the camera zooming in and music swelling in the background; a good show for the masses. The company that built Cosmopolis would be pleased, to say nothing of the advertisers.

Carsten smiled down at me, and I at him. Then he took my hand and we returned to his Porsche for the drive home.

I invited him in. We had a drink, discussing dinner plans and what we might do afterward. Every movie known to man was playing somewhere in town—or could be, if we chose the right menu option—as was the Cirque du Soleil, the Blue Man Group and pretty much everything else you could imagine.

I thought about changing clothes, and excused myself to the “little girl’s room” to check my makeup. I studied Vanessa’s image in the mirror, amazed all over again to think that such a beautiful and sexy woman was actually me. I took a brush to my hair, then freshened my lipstick. A moment later, the door opened.

“I got lonely,” Carsten said. He smiled, and part of me melted inside. “Oh… Come here, you.” I took his hand and drew him to me. He leaned down. I lifted my head to meet him halfway, my lashes fluttering closed and my mouth half-open. My lips met his and clung there like a magnet to steel. After a long kiss, we slipped into a tight hug. “About dinner…” I began. “Dinner can wait,” he said softly, before pulling back. His hand caressed my hair. “But Heaven can’t.” I looked into his eyes, then nodded. I wanted it too.

A moment later I found myself lifted onto the countertop. I perched on the edge, next to the sink, and opened my legs. Carsten stepped into my embrace. My legs wrapped around his thighs. We kissed.
“I’ve been thinking about this from the moment I saw you,” he said, his breath ragged. He nibbled on my earlobe, then caressed my neck with his lips.

“Me too,” I sighed, “ever since I realized who you really are.”

“I am Carsten Thurn,” he said. “You are Vanessa Petrova. That’s all that matters. For right now—and for the next two-and-a-half days.” His voice was firm.

I knew what he meant. What would Vanessa do? What would a woman do? The answer came to me in a flash of feminine intuition. Of their own accord, female fingers drew down his zipper and worked his member free, then mated the moist tip of his manhood to the quivering maidenhead between my legs. “Do what you must, you cad,” I sighed into his ear. “I’m at your mercy.”

Before our lips met once more, he whispered my name: “Vanessa.”

I leaned back as he entered me, hair spilling down my back like a wave wrecked upon the shore, swaying from side to side as I wiggled my hips and my boyfriend worked his way inside. So this is what it’s like, I thought, my mind drowning in a flood of erotic sensation. To be a woman—my breath emerging as a high-pitched gasp. A man inside me—pelvic muscles contracting, kneading him, pulling his manhood deeper. To be his woman, for as long as he wants me—the tips of my breasts singing their song of what it means to be female, sending bolts of electric pleasure deep into my brain—and forever altering its gender identity.

I whispered his name: “Carsten.” My arms circled his neck and drew him to me. Our lips met, our mouths opened, our tongues entwined. For what seemed like forever we were joined one unto the other in this manner, as though we formed a single entity: the beast with two backs. I knew then I had become his woman.

His hips spasmed and I felt a spreading warmth. Part of me found the time to wonder what was happening to my old body back in the VR pod. Perhaps in the same moment that womanly pleasure overwhelmed my mind, my physical maleness would also disappear. If that were to happen, it was okay with me.

“Thank you for making me a woman,” I whispered. Carsten just smiled.