

The Gender Plague

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Lance woke up female again on Tuesday—for the third time in the last ten weeks. When the clock-radio blasted him awake with a particularly wrenching rendition of “Your Cheating Heart,” he rolled over, then stiffened as several unexpected mounds of flesh pressed into his chest—breasts, definitely. Damn!

Heart pounding, he peeked under the sheet—not a goddamned hair anywhere on his now very generously endowed chest, and just when he had an important presentation to make to that officious Japanese outfit gearing up to sell seaweed tacos in the good old U.S. of A. Freaking nano-hackers, screwing around with a man’s basic equipment just for the hell of it! The fact that infected women all over Dallas were bound to be waking up male at that very moment was no consolation to a fellow whose family jewels had gone south somewhere in the depths of the night.

Well, that was what came of refusing to wear those stupid plastic gloves every time he left the apartment, but even the most unobtrusive pair made him look like an absolute wimp, and the more extensive plastic-film suits that protected your exposed flesh had all the appeal of full body condoms. In the advertising game, where first impressions were everything, he could not afford to look foolish. Why the hell didn’t the National Institutes of Health develop a real cure instead of a half-assed purging treatment that changed you back, but didn’t prevent additional infections? He had a good mind to start cheating on his taxes like everyone else.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t spare the time to swing by the clinic this morning. If his last appointment was any indication, there would be at least a hundred sufferers ahead of him. Last night’s news had indicated local infection rates had reached new heights, and the clinicians required a report in triplicate of all personal contacts in the last few days in which he could have been infected with this particular batch of nano-virus, which was worse than pointless. How in the hell was he supposed to remember everyone he had brushed up against in an elevator, or shaken hands with?

He jerked the bed sheet off and averted his eyes from the wobbling upper portion of his semi-naked body until he pulled on a crumpled T-shirt to hide the offending bioware. His first two rounds with the plague had demonstrated that he made an abysmal-looking woman, with hips ten miles wide and a nasty double-chin. Even though he had never been classically handsome, he possessed a certain amount of dignified presence as a portly male. As a sagging-breasted, homely female, though, he felt utterly worthless, and the thought of the indignity required to perform the primary bathroom function with this anatomy made him want to commit suicide.

Since he didn’t need to shave his face and absolutely refused to shave legs and armpits, he just showered. The invading nanites had rearranged his body mass so that, although he weighed the

same, there was no chance of wearing his suit pants, so he struggled into a jogging outfit, which strained over his new hips, then e-mailed his secretary, Alexandra, to order a rental-outfit from Gender Temps. She should still have his measurements on file from the last infuriating time this had happened, and he could change at the office before today's critical meeting.

When he arrived, he stalked through the secretarial pool, face averted, scowling. No one dared meet his gaze.

"Good morning, Mr.Reamy," a resonant male voice said. "Your delivery is waiting in your office." The speaker was a broad-shouldered young fellow, firm-chinned, with sparkling gray eyes the exact shade of granite polished to a high sheen.

Lance squinted. "Alexandra?"

"Call me Al," she said. "Your clothes arrived five minutes ago. Gender Temps did a nice job. I think you'll be pleased."

Lance reached for the door of his private office, then paused. "Would you like time off to go to the clinic?"

Her hand strayed up to her short, immaculately arranged blond hair. Her chin was very square, he noticed, just the sort of firm, no-nonsense look he had always wanted but never achieved, no matter how much he worked out. "No," she said. "I like this body. I think I'm going to wear it a while."

"You have to get treated within twenty-four hours," he said. "That's the law."

She smiled, and he was reminded of high school and all those basketball and football jocks who always made him feel like pond scum. "Why? It'll cost a cool \$200, and I'm still liable to bump into someone infected on the way home and wake up male again tomorrow." She held up a brawny arm and checked the length of her tasteful blue-gray blazer's sleeve. "Like my new suit?"

Appalled, Lance ducked his head and slipped into his office, his heart pounding and a dribble of sweat rolling down his temple. He would have to let Alexandra go, that was as plain, unfortunately, as his new breasts. She had lost her grip, and the reputable firm of Deelin, Reamy, Bosco, and Bosco could not afford to keep a miscreant on the payroll. What would his oh-so-proper Japanese clients think of such depravity?

Gender Temps had delivered a slinky size eighteen dark-blue silk suit with matching pumps, panty-hose, and appropriate undergarments. He shuddered as he fingered the lacy white bra.

"Hey, boss!" Alexandra's new ruggedly bass voice reached him over the intercom. "It's all over the media—Congress has voted a moratorium on further mandatory treatment of the nano-plague until a permanent cure has been found."

The bra dropped from his nerveless hand to the floor.

“It’s just too expensive, as well as ineffective.” Her tone was triumphant. “Insurance companies and HMO’s can’t bear the financial burden anymore, not to mention Medicare. It just costs too much with people switching back and forth all the time. They plan to let the plague run its course while they search for a cure.”

“That can’t be.” To his horror, Lance felt his eyes well with tears. “If they do that, no one will ever know what sex he’ll wake up from day to day.” He dabbed furiously at his eyes. Damn hormones, screwing around with a man’s head just when he needed to think clearly. How in the hell did women live like this anyway? There ought to be a law.

Alexandra fingered her jaw. “I think I need a shave. Can I borrow your razor?”

He fished in his briefcase and numbly handed the slim battery powered model over. She thanked him and headed for the Ladies Room with long determined strides.

Locking his door, he made a hasty change into the temp outfit. The bra was cut low and had vicious underwires that bit into his newly tender flesh. He was sweating by the time he finally managed the damn hooks, then stuffed himself into the suit. Surprisingly, the shimmering blue silk hung nicely, smoothing the defects of his lumpy figure, and he did have to admit that he now possessed a rather stunning cleavage. This shade of blue was perfect for him too, emphasizing the turquoise flecks in his hazel eyes. The new pumps, on the other hand, felt at least two sizes too small and crammed his toes into a space no bigger than the business end of an awl.

Alexandra knocked, then opened his door. Clean-shaven, she looked even more intimidating. “Mr. Toroshiba has arrived.” She cocked her head in critical appraisal of his appearance. “Jeez, boss, your hair looks like you stuck your head in a blender. Let me run a quick comb through it.”

Cheeks burning, he perched on the edge of his desk to suffer her ministrations, then straightened his slip and walked into the meeting room with all the dignity he and his pinched toes could muster. Toroshiba’s seaweed-and-smoked-squid taco, one of the most abysmal culinary innovations of the last ten years, was an advertising challenge, if ever he’d seen one. Toroshiba and entourage were already seated around the massive oak table, their plastic-gloved hands folded neatly on the polished wood, their reflections solemnly impatient. Lance bowed from the waist to the exact degree he had been practicing for weeks. “Toroshiba-san, we are honored.”

Ishi Toroshiba was middle-aged, a bit soft around the middle, with distinguished wings of silver hair at his temples. He stiffened. “Where is Lance Albert Reamy, the consultant for whom Toroshiba Corporation contracted?”

“I, uh—” Lance’s throat seemed constricted by a bowling ball as he tried to swallow. “I am Lance Reamy.”

“I see.” The ice in Toroshiba’s tone could have stopped an atomic reaction in mid-sequence. He seized his Moroccan leather briefcase and stood. “We shall of course seek alternate representation. Good day.”

“No, wait!” Lance reached for his arm, then drew back, reminding himself to touch no one. “This is just temporary! I’m still the same, uh, man.”

Toroshiba’s lip curled. “It is rather obvious you are not.”

“Inside, I’m the same person, with the same skills, the same expertise.” Lance felt ridiculously close to tears. He knotted his fingers in an effort to control himself.

Alexandra slipped through the open door, her striped navy tie aligned, shirt cuffs perfectly adjusted. She bowed. “Toroshiba-san,” she said smoothly, “I’m sure you want your Tacos del Mar franchises to open on time. A delay would be horrendously expensive, and there is that upcoming chain of Fat-Free Borsht Houses which could steal your intended market share, given half a chance.”

Toroshiba hesitated and she took the opportunity to lower the lights and focus his attention on the oversize mock-ups at the end of the room. “This campaign is already laid out, and I assure you it will be quite effective. It would take weeks, maybe even months, for another firm to get this far, and quite frankly, you will not find another so innovative. If you’ll just take your seat, we’ll run a rough edit of one of the planned TV ads and you can see for yourself.”

The Japanese executive grunted and sank back into his chair, perching his briefcase on his lap as though he might flee any moment.

“Now,” Alexandra said as the tape rolled, “can we get you some refreshments? Tea, perhaps, and some almond cookies?”

Toroshiba’s eyes were riveted on the two animated figures of edible seaweed on the screen, arguing back and forth over which would be the first to climb into the waiting taco shell and surrender itself to the ecstasy of being eaten by a ravenous Texan football fan wearing a ten gallon hat. He nodded.

Alexandra rolled her eyes at Lance and he suddenly realized she meant him to make the tea while she presented his campaign. Thinking of the lucrative account at risk here, he bit back an oath, straightened his spine, and tottered on his high heels back into the tiny kitchen to heat the kettle. After he had loaded the lacquer tray with cups, saucers, spoons, and cookies, he resisted the urge to brush the rim of Toroshiba’s ear with his little finger as he set the cup in front of him. Too bad, he thought. He would have liked to imagine Toroshiba-san waking up to an altered outlook tomorrow.



Lance stopped by the clinic after work only to learn all purgative agent stock had been bought up by Dallas's wealthiest citizens in the first ten minutes after the President's announcement. No more was expected in for a week, at which time the same thing would probably happen again. But, the receptionist pointed out, infection rates were so high now, if he just went about his life as usual, no doubt he would come in contact with another infected individual and revert before the week was out.

Another infected individual ... Of course—Alexandra! All they had to do was to touch, and then each would wake up in the proper gender in the morning. He raced out to his car and punched in her home number.

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Alexandra, it's Lance Reamy. The clinic is out of purgative agents, but—"

She laughed a hearty good-fellows-well-met laugh that set his teeth on edge. "And you want to come over and have me put you out of your misery, right?"

He swallowed hard. "My nanites would benefit you too. We could both wake up as ourselves tomorrow."

"I don't want to be myself, at least not yet," Alexandra said. "I'm having too much fun."

"Fun!" he roared. Sweat pooled in the armpits of his silk suit jacket. "You call this fun? What's the matter with you? A real woman wouldn't put up with this crap for a second. Don't you have a boyfriend, or family? What are they going to think if you stay a man?"

"My boyfriend, Tom, has been a woman for the last three weeks, because he was too broke to go in for treatment and too proud to apply for Medicaid. I've been really depressed, but now we have a hot date tonight and I can't wait. As a matter of fact, I may be late tomorrow." The connection clicked off.

He stared mutely on the handset, his heart pounding. The implications were staggering. Without treatment, people were going to be bouncing back and forth between male and female like Mexican jumping beans. Once the rate of infection reached a hundred percent, everyone would wake up as the opposite sex almost every morning. The concept of gender would become almost meaningless, personal relationships impossible unless a person "swung" every way imaginable. No one would ever know the true sex of the person sitting across the table from him. Marriage vows would be laughable. It was all so hopeless, he felt like putting his head down and sobbing.

Finally he washed his face and combed his hair. Alexandra had shown him how to coax it around his face to soften his jowls. A little makeup would help too. If he was going to spend much time as a woman, he might have to get used to such nonsense. He couldn't bear being homely.

He got in his car and drove to his favorite bar, the Chili Pequeno, where they played progressive country music and made a damn fine marguerita. He perched on a stool at the long black bar,

polished brighter than astronomical glass, legs crossed. He was nursing his third marguerita beneath the slimy glimmer of the lava lamps, playing with the rim of salt around the lip of the glass with his little finger when a trim fortyish man slid onto the stool beside him.

“Hey, there, little lady,” he said. “You look almighty sad. Can a fella buy you a drink?”

Lance scowled. At size eighteen, he was not little, nor was he at heart a lady, and he was in no mood to be pinched by some oaf too stupid to see he was really a red-blooded man. He glared up into a earthy, honest face topped with two amazing deep-blue eyes.

The man held out his hand. “Name’s Alice Marie Hansen.”

“Alice Marie?” Lance stared at the offered hand. “You mean—?”

“Well, hell, I used to be female, but that don’t mean much these days, does it?” Alice Marie smiled. “We all just gotta go with the flow.”

Lance took Alice Marie’s large hand in his, feeling his smaller fingers enveloped. It was a curiously nice sensation. “Lance,” he said. “Lance Wayne Reamy.”

“Mighty nice to meet you, Lance.” Alice Marie winked. “Especially as how we got so much in common.”



He woke up male the next morning, an attractive naked middle-aged woman rolled up in the sheets beside him, one lock of salt-and-pepper hair straggling across her cheek. The memories of the night before steamed behind his eyes. It had been rather more fun than he’d expected, considerably less work and of longer duration. He’d no intention of going to bed with Alice Marie, but the margueritas had kept piling up and then the two of them had danced all those sensuous slow dances together, his cheek snugged against her warm, muscular chest, until something inside of him got very insistent and somehow they had wound up here in his apartment with their clothes piled in the living room, allowing nature to take her course, which she had subsequently done like the mighty Mississippi in full spring flood. His cheeks heated at the memory.

But, at any rate, he was back in form, and regardless of the process, grateful. He ran a finger along her jawline. “Good morning.”

“Mmmm ...” She rolled over and opened her eyes, looking up at him for a second dreamily before her gaze widened into horror. “Oh, my gosh! Who are you?”

“Lance—remember?”

She put a hand to her forehead. “Lance? Oh!” She pulled up the sheet and stared intently at the landscape beneath it. “Oh, my, I was sorta getting used to things the way they were.”

“I wasn’t,” Lance said flatly. “Now, I have to get to the office, but I’ll drop you on the way, if you like.”

She sat up, the sheet held firmly around her, and smiled. “You mean I’ll drop you. You were absolutely snookered last night, so I drove.”

“Oh.” He lumbered toward the bathroom. “Where do you work?”

“Actually, I own Gender Temps.” His eyes widened, but she sighed. “But I’m afraid I’m fixing to go bust.”

“Why?”

“Business is way down. Folks switching back and forth a lot are investing in their own wardrobes, and now, with the government ruling, everyone’s going to be changing all the time so even more of them will be prepared. They won’t need emergency outfits.”

He picked up his blue silk skirt from the floor and hung it in the closet. His fingers lingered on the alluring feel of raw silk. “I suppose you’re right.”



Alice Marie dropped around his office at lunchtime. Fortunately, it was well publicized that plague nanites had a two-generation DNA memory which recognized their most recent host, as well as their current one. They were programmed to reengineer the next unfamiliar DNA sequence they encountered, so he and Alice Marie were now safe with each other as long as they avoided additional infections.

She took him to a pleasant little Mexican cafe and he took the opportunity to study her as a female while she read the menu. She was attractive enough, but not nearly as striking as her masculine version, he decided. Her eyes were still the vivid blue of summer seas though, and she had a generous, well-proportioned figure. He found himself admiring the way her maroon summer dress was cut to flatter her curves. He lost track of the conversation and wound up doodling country lyrics on his place mat and humming the tunes they had danced to under his breath. His feet itched for the Two-Step and he kept having flashes of the kiss of silk against his naked skin, his cheek nestled against Alice Marie’s brawny chest, her strong arm resting in the hollow of his back, the crisp feel of chest hair against his breasts—

He shuddered. What in the hell was wrong with him? Alice Marie reached across the table and took his hand in hers. “It was nice last night, wasn’t it?” she whispered huskily across the basket of sopapillas.

He nodded, staring down at his untouched cheese enchiladas, a lump in his throat, unable to think why he was so forlorn.

With her free hand, she traced the line of his cheekbone with her finger, just as she done while they dancing. “Well, it can be just as nice tonight, sugar. My place or yours?”



They both overslept the next morning, and Alice Marie was worried when she left to meet with her Gender Temps managers. “I have to keep a close eye on things,” she’d said. “We’re operating in the red.” She bent over and pecked him on the lips. “Tonight?”

Lance had nodded, then arrived fifteen minutes late for his meeting with Toroshiba. Alexandra, now female again, courtesy of an evening with her infected boyfriend, indicated the conference room with her head as he strode by. He smoothed his imported Japanese silk tie with its tiny red dancing squids on a tasteful black background, bought specially for the occasion, and assumed a dignified expression as he opened the heavy oak door.

A stout Japanese woman rose from the end chair at the table, her expression haggard. “Mr.Reamy?”

“May I help you?” Lance asked politely.

The woman scowled. “I am Ishi Toroshiba.”

Lance’s eyebrows rose. He’d always thought of Japanese women being petite, fragile creatures, but this female version of Toroshiba was built like a truck, with heavy calves and a low sloping brow. “What can I, uh, do for you, Toroshiba-san?”

The Japanese flushed and gestured down at the heavy breasts bobbing without support beneath his cotton dress shirt. “This is—” He stared down at the floor, then darted forward to seize Lance’s hand, breathing hard, obviously trying to get control of his emotions. “I find myself in need of—counsel, Reamy-san, never having been a woman before. There’s so much to know, so much to put on, and snap and hook and arrange. I cannot deal with it all!” A tear dribbled from the corner of one dark-brown eye. “Please say you will assist me.”

Lance jerked away, staring at his fingers, horrified. Because he was late, he’d forgotten to wear gloves. At this very second, Toroshiba’s foreign nanites were infiltrating every nook and cranny of his body, just waiting for the hormonal changes brought on by sleep to once again reprogram his anatomy. By this time tomorrow, he’d be female, as would Alice Marie. Toroshiba, on the other hand, had just infected himself with Lance’s nanites. He was going to wake up male. Lance had a sudden suspicion that Toroshiba, damn his eyes, had known exactly what he was doing.

He backed out of reach, resisting the urge to wipe his hand off. “Uh, I’m sure we can help.” He opened the door. “I’ll just have my secretary, Alexandra, come in. She’s had much more experience being a woman than I have.”

Toroshiba turned away, shoulders hunched. Lance heard muffled sobs as he went to the door and gestured desperately at Alexandra. “Get in here and tell Toroshiba whatever he wants to know.”

Alexandra looked up from her computer screen. “About the print ads?”

“Hell, no!” Lance scowled. “Tampons, feminine deodorants, PMS, eyebrow plucking, leg shaving, panty-hose, the whole damn works!”

“Oh.” Alexandra eased past him into the conference room and closed the door.

The rest of the day passed in a weary haze. Toroshiba regained his composure and left with a printed list of female accessories, his eyes made up with Alexandra’s favorite Frosty Plum eye shadow and looking so alluring, Lance had a pang of jealousy. He ate a chicken salad sandwich alone at his desk and watched a breaking story on CNN which predicted the plague would solve the world’s population problems, since pregnant women automatically miscarried when infected. To carry a child to term, women would have to avoid being infected for the entire nine months, which could only be achieved with the utmost effort and abstinence from social contact.

When he got home, he called Alice Marie to break the news they were going to be out of synch now, genderwise. By tomorrow, he would be able to infect her, but then they would both wind up women. He felt like crying and couldn’t keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“Hell, sweet cheeks,” she said over the phone, “it’s not the end of the world. Meet me at the Chili Pequeno in half an hour. We’ll just make the best of this.”

They danced until the bar closed. He led the slow dances and let her lead the Two-step. They wound up taking a taxi to his place and then made the hay while the sun shone, so to speak, with such a vengeance, they were both winded and content. In the morning, of course, he once again had need of his blue silk skirt and pumps.

“You know,” Alice Marie said, straightening his slip, “if you’d just do a few sit-ups now and then to tuck in your tummy, you’d look just like Miss Texas, 1982. I swear, I haven’t seen such magnificent knockers since my best friend, Junie-Lee Mason, bought herself a pair of the finest guaranteed-not-to-leak specials at that ritzy clinic down by Waxahatchie, and she went on to a career as a Dallas Cowgirl.”

Lance turned sideways and studied himself in the mirror. They were rather spectacular.

Alice Marie reached up to kiss his cheek, but he waved her back. “Better not. You’ll wake up with hair on your chest tomorrow.”

She grinned. “You know, I kinda like hair on my chest. It makes for a nice change. Give me a big juicy kiss and wish me luck. I’m having the books audited today.”

Lance hesitated. He couldn’t kiss her smack on the lips, not when they couldn’t scratch up a Y chromosome between the two of them. Wouldn’t that be—he swallowed hard—perverted?

Alice Marie grabbed him by the ears and kissed him until his smoke curled out of his navel and he couldn’t remember his name, much less which gender he was today. He swayed as she whispered hotly into his ear, “There, sugar-lips, that’ll have to keep me until tonight.” She winked and flounced out the door, leaving him both dazed and burning for more.

He sank onto couch, trembling, the panty-hose he had been about to put on wadded up in one hand, and stared at his feet, now a very feminine size nine, AA. His toes curled forlornly. He felt like he was losing his mind—he kept having these bizarre impulses to paint his toenails Passion Flower Pink, shave his bikini line, and—God help him—read steamy time travel romance novels. Yesterday, with Alice Marie’s help, he’d actually bought a lacy shirt, a denim jumper, and a really daring lavender nightie.

He groaned and pressed his hands over his eyes, appalled that he could even distinguish lavender from mauve and purple and lilac. Obviously, these damn female hormones were shorting out his neurons. What if he suffered permanent brain damage and, even after a nano-inhibitor was found, never made it all the way back to being a red-blooded Texas male who liked to sweat and swear, chug beer with his friends and watch back-to-back football games? What if he were stuck like this forever?

The possibility was too unbearable to even consider.



Toroshiba made an appearance at the agency that afternoon, male again, thanks to Lance’s nanites, flawlessly dressed in a thousand dollar Armani suit, and smug to boot, demanding to view the slides for the Tacos Del Mar campaign again. His eyes were once again inscrutable and full of business, with nary a trace of Plum Frost eyeshadow in evidence. Lance set up the conference room and then displayed his mock-ups again in sequence, one finger on his lips.

Finally Toroshiba leaned back and shook his head. “Something is missing.”

Lance snapped the lights on. “What segment are you dissatisfied with, Toroshiba-san?”

Toroshiba scowled. “I cannot say exactly.”

Lance tucked a stray tendril of hair behind his ear, then smoothed his skirt, trying not to let his annoyance show. “It would be helpful if you could give me some direction.”

Toroshiba pushed back his chair from the conference table. “You are being paid, Mr.Reamy, to direct this advertising campaign. If you cannot find the flaw in these ads, we will be forced to seek other representation.”

“But—” Lance watched helplessly as the Japanese executive strode officiously through the outer office, his cuffs precisely aligned, diamond cuff links reflecting the overhead lights into Lance’s eyes.

He closed the door and replayed the slides, then examined all the print ads. Toroshiba was right. They had seemed fine before, but now he saw they did lack vitality. Something was missing, but damned if he could say what.



They danced the night away with a larger than usual crowd at the Chili Pequeno, then went home to an experience that was eye-opening, to say the least. He’d had no idea women could excite each other like that. It was a bit like being blasted by a volcano, then tied to the space shuttle and launched into the heart of an exploding star. His last thought, before falling into a satisfied, albeit exhausted, sleep, was to wonder why women even bothered with men.

His first thought, however, upon waking up the next morning was that he had to put a stop to this nonsense. He was downright horrified at himself. A little experimentation never hurt anyone, but the way he and Alice Marie were carrying on, folks were going to think they were perverts.

He eased out of bed and fumbled for his robe. No more wild nights together, he resolved, unless he was back to being male, as the good Lord had made him, and she, female. When they were out of synch, well, they’d just have to control themselves, that was all.

“Morning, lover,” Alice Marie murmured in a sleepy baritone from the bed, now male again, thanks to his nanites.

“Uh, hi,” he mumbled, then stopped in shock. His real voice was back, the one he’d been born with. He opened his robe and found the standard set of male equipment staring up at him. Someone must have brushed against him on the dance floor, or maybe Alexandra had inadvertently touched him, when she brought his coffee.

“Hey, you changed too.” She turned over, eyed the clock, then regarded him sleepily. “Jeez, it’s early, hon. Why don’t you crawl back in and snuggle for a few minutes?” She patted the bed invitingly.

He closed his robe hurriedly and flushed. “I—can’t.”

She ran a hand back through her short tousled salt-and-pepper hair. “Why? Is that Toroshiba creep giving you that much grief?”

“Well, yes,” he said, “but that’s not it.”

The covers fell away as she sat up, baring her broad, hairy chest. He stared at it numbly, remembering resting his head on her shoulder, feeling comforted and safe and loved as they Two-Stepped the night away.

“Why, then?” she asked.

“Well, hell! Look at us!” He clenched his hands.

She grinned. “I am looking, big boy, and I like what I see. Come to Mama!”

“I can’t.” He turned away, clutching the edges of his robe together. “Not when you’re like—that.”

She slid out of the bed and stared down at herself. “Naked?”

“No—male!”

Silence descended between them like an iron curtain. She drew in her breath with a soft hiss. “Well,” she said, pulling the sheet off the bed and wrapping it around herself, “that didn’t seem to bother you none the night we met, or several other rather steamy nights I can recall since.” Her chin was high, but he could see the pain in her eyes.

“But—” He struggled for words. “That was different. We were both different, opposite sexes, that is.”

Her lips thinned. “Not last night.”

“Last night was a mistake.” He opened a drawer and fumbled for clean socks. “We just can’t do that anymore. People will talk. They’ll say we’re—we’re—”

“Queer?” she supplied. “Lance, do you really think anyone cares about that stuff anymore? People change back and forth all the time now, sometimes every single night. It doesn’t matter what exterior you’re wearing; what counts is who you are inside.”

“Well, inside this body is a man, goddammit!” he blurted. “And it’s going to stay that way!” He bent over, concentrating on finding a pair of socks that actually matched and didn’t look up until the apartment door clicked shut.



When he got to work, a note stuck to his computer screen ordered him to report to Thomas Deelin’s office. He set his briefcase on his desk, pulse pounding. The most senior of the

founding partners, Tom Deelin was a sonofabitch, if ever one had been born, hidebound, self-righteous, and about as bright as a squashed armadillo. Lance adjusted his red-squid tie, checked his hair, then headed for the partners' suites.

Deelin raised a gray eyebrow as Lance appeared in his doorway. "Well, at least you had the sense to show up as a man."

Lance flushed. "You, uh, wanted to see me, sir?"

Deelin leaned back in his chair and folded plastic-gloved hands across his paunch. "Ishi Toroshiba says your Tacos Del Mar campaign is a piece of shit."

"It needs a little something," Lance said. A bead of perspiration dribbled down his neck. "I'm reworking it."

"He also says you have the morals of an alleycat in heat." Deelin's rheumy eyes drilled him. "Talk around the office is you logged in more hours as a broad last week than Princess Di."

"I don't think you're being fair, sir." Lance set his jaw. "Infection rates are so high that even a man who's being careful can be touched by a waitress, or a someone in an elevator—"

Deelin slapped his desk and leaned forward. "Let me put it this way, Reamy. We aren't in the habit of keeping perverts on the payroll. Show up in drag again and you're history! Do I make myself clear?"

Lance's adams-apple bobbed. "Perfectly."

"And you've got twenty-four hours to satisfy Toroshiba. After that, you're history anyway." He picked up a newspaper on his desk and folded it back to the sports section.

Lance retreated, his cheeks ablaze. How dare that doddering old idiot! Lance had brought in over half of last year's new clients, including that tricky lemon-curry cookies account. No one short of an advertising genius could have figured out a way to sell those. He darted into the restroom and bathed his face with cold water. His nerves were doing the rumba and he felt hollowed out and lost. Between Alice Marie and the Toroshiba account, his whole life was falling to pieces.

One of the stall doors creaked open. He turned around as his secretary, Alexandra, emerged, adjusting a wrinkle in her panty-hose. "Oh, hi, there, boss!" she said brightly. "Fancy meeting you here."

Lance blanched. "Nice eyeshadow," he said with all the aplomb he could summon. "I've been looking everywhere for just that shade of blue." He peered into the mirror at his hair and sighed. "Can I borrow your comb?"



He lugged the Toroshiba files home that night, spread them out on the floor and examined them until he was cross-eyed, but could find no clue as to what was missing. Tacos Del Mar had all the qualities Americans professed to love—they were not only fast to prepare, but low-fat, cheap, and surprisingly nutritious. And he had lined up an impressive array of celebrities to hawk the noxious tidbits, football and basketball players, hunks from nighttime soaps, Miss Texas and Miss America. What more could anyone want?

Finally, when he couldn't stand being cooped up another second, he stuffed the files back into his briefcase, donned his plastic gloves, and headed down to the Chili Pequeno. He was not looking for Alice Marie, he told himself, although he wouldn't mind smoothing out things with her. Sooner or later, she'd turn female again, then maybe—

No, he told himself. Not even then. Once she converted, via someone else's touch, the first time they indulged in even the most innocent of kisses, he would wind up female the following day, and shortly thereafter unemployed. It wasn't fair, but that was the way his brownies, and everyone else's, were crumbling these days.

He nursed a marguerita, double salt, over in a dark corner, away from the splotchy glare of the lava lamps, until he noticed Alice Marie out on the dance floor in the arms of a slim young thing. The girl, no more than twenty-five, wore a slinky red dress slit up to her very shapely thigh. The two of them were swaying to the alluring strains of Lance's current favorite, "You Hung My Wings Up on Your Horns." His blood turned to ice water at the way that young piece of fluff, obviously smitten, stared up into Alice Marie's ruggedly masculine features.

A lump rose in his throat the size of Houston. He wanted his old life back, goddammit, where men were always men and women never grew so much as a single hair on their chests, nor had the gall to possess voices deeper than his. Alice Marie wasn't the only mackerel in the sea and he just wasn't going to play this sicko game of Russian roulette with his sexual identity anymore. He lurched to his feet and headed for the door.

Alice Marie abandoned the Two-Step to block his path. "Hey, big guy," she said, "what's your hurry?" She turned to her dark-eyed companion. "Consuelo, I'd like you to meet a real honest-to-god man."

Consuelo beamed. "Hey, there aren't many of those left anymore."

Close-up, Lance could see the little snippet, who had been positively draping herself all over Alice Marie, didn't even know how to apply her eye liner so it didn't smudge, and it wasn't all that hard, by god. If he could learn to do it, anyone could. And her bra peeked through the armholes of her dress. She was positively a disgrace to the skirt she wore.

Alice Marie cleared her throat. "So, Lance, did you fix the Toroshiba account yet?"

He was stunned; in spite of everything, she was still thinking of him. He stared into her sea-blue eyes and thought of all the women he had dated, how they had seemed okay at first, but then bored him spitless with their unwavering predictability and ceaseless demands. He remembered his times with Alice Marie, in bed, on the dance floor, at dinner, how she had been by turns funny and warm, passionate, shrewd, and intelligent, anything but predictable. Man or not, Alice Marie was ten times more woman—no, ten times more person—than anyone he'd ever known. He realized he was trembling and his aching throat seemed two sizes too small. "Say," he said huskily, "is it too late to cut in?"

Consuelo flashed even white teeth at him and held her hands out. "Okay by me."

"Thanks." He stripped off his plastic gloves, threw them on the floor, then took Alice Marie's warm hands in his own. The touch of her skin was like a naked electrical outlet. Shivers marched up and down his spine as he leaned against her muscular chest.

"Lance," she said tremulously, "hon, are you sure?"

He nestled closer, rasping his five o'clock shadow against hers, savoring the glorious scent of their mingled aftershaves. "I've never been so sure of anything in my whole goddammed life."



They danced into the wee hours of the morning, talked, stared into each other's eyes until they were breathing in unison and finishing one another's thoughts. When they went back to his apartment, their lovemaking was like being swept barrelless over Niagara Falls, then drowning contentedly at the bottom in a vast lake of peach brandy. He fell asleep, arms snuggled around Alice Marie's brawny chest, confident he had come home at last.

Close to morning, he dreamed of seaweed-and-smoked-squid tacos served in a vast restaurant which catered to, not women or men, but just people. Everywhere he looked, he saw people eating, talking, quarreling, smiling. Try as he might, he could not tell who was male or female.

When he woke, the mood of that unique establishment was still upon him, cozy and accepting, devoid of expectations and stereotypes. A place where people ate, he thought muzzily, just people. Then he bolted up, his head spinning. He had designed the Tacos Del Mar campaign to appeal to men and women, which were becoming rarer every day. Toroshiba's potential customers were people, who might be men or women at any particular minute, but who were no longer just one or the other.

He slid out of bed, careful not to wake Alice Marie, and worked out the details. An hour later, when she brought him a steaming cup of coffee, he had the preliminary plan roughed out.

She leaned over his shoulder. “My god, that’s incredible. You’ve hit that nail right on the old head. No wonder Gender Temps is going down the tubes. I’ve been thinking in terms of male/female. It’s time to diversify.” She kissed his ear and darted into the bedroom to shower.

As soon as she left, he showered, shaved, threw on the first clothes that came to hand, and headed for work, so excited, he could think of nothing else. He burst into Deelin’s office, briefcase under his arm. “I’ve got it!”

Deelin looked up from the comics page. “What the hell—?”

Lance popped open his briefcase and spread his sketches across the mahogany desk. “Look, we have to stop thinking about men and women as discrete units of physiology. Because of the plague, the sexes are blending. We need to appeal to our customers as people first. Beefcake actors, beauty queens, and macho football players just aren’t going to do it anymore. We have to get beyond that kind of old-fashioned gender-bound thinking.”

Deelin rose and leaned over his desk. “Blending, is that what you call it?” He reached out and fingered the lace at Lance’s throat.

Lance glanced down and saw he was wearing the new blouse and denim jumper which Alice Marie had helped him pick out. He became acutely aware of the snug grip of panty hose along his legs and the satin touch of his slip. His face warmed to volcanic temperatures. “N-never mind that—what’s important is that I know how to handle the Tacos Del Mar Account now.”

Deelin’s jugular vein throbbed with operatic intensity. “Do you think,” he said between clenched teeth, “that for one minute I would let a pervert who prances around town in women’s clothes handle a top account like Toroshiba? Just sashay yourself out of here on the double, mister, and don’t ever come back!”

Lance smoothed the lace at his throat, then gathered up his sketches. “Is this your final word on the matter?” He asked with as much coolness as he could muster.

“You bet your ass it is!”

Lance sighed, laid the briefcase down, and leaned over the desk, staring directly into Deelin’s watery eyes. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to do.” He seized Deelin’s tie, jerked him closer, and kissed him full on the lips.

Deelin choked and staggered backwards, arms flailing, as Lance released him. “I—I—”

“And don’t come crying to me when you can’t tell the front of your panty-hose from the back,” Lance said. “I quit!”

The elevator ride down to the parking lot had never seemed so sweet.



The elation had worn off though, by the time Alice Marie came home that evening. He had the Tacos Del Mar campaign laid out on the coffee table, staring at it forlornly.

“Lance, honey, what’s wrong?” She asked as she closed the front door. “You look like someone ran over your favorite hunting dog.”

“I got fired.” He gestured at the lacy blouse and jumper he still wore. “I was so damn excited, I wasn’t thinking. I just threw on the first thing I found and dashed into work. The rest, I expect you can imagine for yourself.”

She sat on the arm of the couch and smoothed his hair with one hand. “It’s not the end of the world. You can find another job, a better one, I’m betting. Who cares about Toroshiba? Your approach will work for anyone. It’s the wave of the future.”

Lance hung his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “Nobody’s going to hire me now, not once Deelin spreads the word. I’ll be a laughingstock all over this city.”

“Hell, I’ll hire you,” Alice Marie said. “Just this morning you were brilliant, absolutely light-years ahead of everyone else in your field, and I need to diversify. Gender Temps will start its own advertising division and then you’ll blow these other bozos out of the water. Why, in a few months, all of Texas will be begging for your services.”

He raised his head and gazed up into her gutsy blue eyes. With her support, it could work, he thought. Together, the two of them could do anything. He leaped to his feet. “By god, you’re right! Let’s do it!”

She enfolded him in a bear-hug that almost cracked his ribs. The heady scent of her aftershave threaded through his brain until he could hardly think and he thought he heard the roar of Niagara Falls somewhere in the background.

“Put on that slinky red little number we bought the other day,” she whispered hotly into his ear, “so we can celebrate.”

He nodded, his heart so full he couldn’t speak. They would go out and dance until their feet hurt, then come home and celebrate in another, more satisfying way. And if they brushed against someone in the course of the night and woke up the next morning transformed, it wouldn’t matter because what was in their hearts would always be the same.

He rasped a finger over her five o’clock shadow and his breast filled with a fierce tenderness. Love was the only thing that mattered, he thought, no matter where, or in what shape, you found it.

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