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The Imitation Game

Amanda Hawkins

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We met in Psych 101, on the first day of the semester. God knows what possessed her to sit next to me, but she did. The rest is history—hers and mine.

Cassandra Dahlman... I know her name as well as my own, given how often I had to write it down—mostly practicing to forge her signature. Her writing was really girly, with lots of loops, which made it tough to get right.

People who saw us together assumed we were brother and sister. After that first class, some guy I barely knew from residence said, “Hey dude, your sister’s hot.” I told him we weren’t related, but he just laughed.

Sure, there’s a resemblance; mostly around the face. I couldn’t see it at first. Cassie’s smart as a whip, but she was kind of a girly-girl and she dressed the part, while I rarely wore anything but jeans and a rock-n-roll T-shirt. She wore her hair long and blonde, and styled it with lots of body, which is cool, and she definitely wasn’t one of those girls who avoids makeup. On the other hand, I’m small for a guy and she’s tall for a girl, which made us close to the same height—and weight, since I’m not exactly built like Schwarzenegger. So even though on the surface we could hardly look more different if we tried, it wouldn’t surprise anyone if we were related. Maybe that’s what put the idea into her head.

It didn’t take us long to realize we were taking the same subjects. I saw her in my English Lit class, and later found we shared other courses in different timeslots. Not that that’s unusual for students in first-year Arts and Science.

After sitting through three or four lectures together I finally took the bait, bucked up just enough courage and asked her out for coffee. She accepted and, long story short, we became friends. *Only* friends, I might add; she made it clear from the beginning that it wouldn’t be anything else. Still, guys like me live in hope.

It wasn’t long after we started hanging out that she came up with the idea for the Imitation Game. Or maybe she had it in mind from the first moment she saw me; who knows? “Hey, Josh,” she said one day as we were headed to the library after class. “You know how everyone thinks we’re brother and sister?”

“You get that too, huh?” In spite of hearing it myself, I was surprised she had.

“All the time.” She paused. “It got me thinking... what if we played a prank, like on the whole school? You could pretend to be me and I could pretend to be you, and then see how long we can get away with it.”

I pulled a face. “Pretend to be *you*? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Cass, but you’re frickin’ gorgeous. I couldn’t pull that off in a million years.”

She grinned. “I’m pretty sure you could. You don’t give yourself enough credit, Josh. You’re a cute guy. Not in a big, macho sort of way, but... the other way.”

“Riiight. The quiet, slightly effeminate way. That what you meant?”

She shook her head. “You’re not effeminate. But—don’t take this the wrong way. You *could* be feminine, if you wanted to be. With the right attitude—and the right ‘look’, of course.” I told her it was a moot point: not gonna happen. She stopped and faced me. “Actually... it could. Before the semester I went to this new salon downtown. It’s got a high-tech machine, really fancy. You show it a picture of how you want to look, then strip down and go inside and it does its best to make you look like the person in the photo. I know a girl who works there and she let me watch. She just feeds in whatever the computer says it needs—lotions, sprays, cosmetics, *anything*. The machine does washing and drying, waxing, applying makeup, you name it. It’s incredible. I saw one girl who came out looking like a supermodel. She had a pretty good body to begin with, but even so she said she never imagined she could look *that* good.”

“Good for her,” I growled. “What makes you think it’d work on me?”

She touched my arm. “Because you look like *me*, Josh. We’ll give the machine *my* picture; let it do the rest.” She giggled. “Then we’ll give it your picture and I’ll let it turn me into *you*. Wouldn’t that be a hoot?”

“Are you serious? What happens next—we swap clothes and walk out of the salon as each other?” She nodded, her eyes pleading. “That’s crazy,” I said.

“I’m serious, it’ll work. With a little practice, like over the weekend, I can teach you how to talk like me, and how to *act* like me. My parents will be out of town, so we’ll have the house to ourselves. C’mon, it’ll be fun.” I tried to explain that I wasn’t a cross-dresser, but she wouldn’t listen. “Hey, there’s nothing wrong with cross-dressing. I did it myself for parties back in high school, and you know what? I looked like you do now. That’s how I know this’ll work.”

I told her I’d think about it, but I didn’t. The next day she brought it up again. “We can make a game of it,” she said. “An imitation game: we pretend to be each other and the loser is the first one who gets read as a fake.”

“That’s hardly fair. People look at you all the time ‘cause you’re pretty. A guy like me is practically invisible. You’d win hands-down.”

“You’d be surprised. If a girl’s pretty, that’s all people see. They don’t notice the details. It’s easier to spot when something’s different about a guy.”

I still didn’t believe it was going to happen. “I dunno. Seems to me like I’d have a lot more at stake than you. No one cares if a girl dresses like a guy, but if I get outed as a guy who dresses up as a girl, it’s over. Reputation: shot.”

“Fair enough. How about I give you odds?” She looked thoughtful. “If I win, you have to—oh, let’s say, do my laundry for a month. Including the ironing.”

“Uh-huh. And if I win? You do *my* laundry for how many months?”

She shook her head. “If you win, we sleep together.” She laughed at my slack-jawed reaction. “I’m talking about the other thing, not just sleep. Once a month, *at least*, for the rest of the school year. Do we have a deal?”

We had a deal. The lure of more ‘sleep’ than my entire life to date was too strong. Besides, I told myself, it couldn’t hurt to try. If I ended up looking like a dude in drag, another trip through the machine would reverse the effect. And Cassandra might feel guilty enough about it to sleep me with at least once. That alone would make her ridiculous game worth my while. Or so I hoped.

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Friday evening. We motored downtown in Cassie’s little yellow Yaris. The Salon de la Rochelle occupied one corner of a mini-mall in an upscale neighborhood not far from City Hall. Inside, Cass introduced me to her beautician friend, Theresa. She led us to a frosted glass door at the back of the room, and slid it aside.

“This thing is freakin’ awesome,” she said, gesturing at a glossy pink pod that looked like it just arrived from outer space. “Only trouble is, it could put a lotta gals like me outta work.” She ran a hand through her bouncy brunette curls. “Most of our clients prefer a hands-on approach, but that could change. Kids these days are more attuned to tech.”

“It looks pretty expensive,” I said, for the first time wondering about cost.

“The owner uses it herself,” Theresa said. “Money was no object.”

Cassandra nudged me. “Don’t worry. My folks left me a credit card.”

Theresa popped the lid. The interior looked a bit like the business end of a dental clinic—with restraints. “First thing, we need to finish setting up a profile for each of you. I already entered the basic info, but we need to input the target image. Sometimes that’s just a scanned magazine photo, but since you’re both here we can do a little better.” She poked at the touch-screen on the side of the pod. “This is Josh’s profile, so... Cass? You’re up.” She pointed to the padded recliner.

Cassie stepped over the lip of the inclined opening and perched herself on the seat. “Should I lie down? Does it matter that I’m still dressed?”

“Not a bit. Don’t move.” A camera emerged from the ceiling and panned slowly around her head. “With this much data about the target,” Theresa said, “the auto-salon doesn’t have to guess about what goes where. That makes the makeover more accurate.” She shrugged. “It’s what the manual says.”

We switched places and the camera circled my head like a giant mosquito. I was starting to get twitchy. Seeing the pod and listening to Theresa talk about it made turning into a girl seem that much more real. My stomach churned.

Theresa finished at the screen. “Okay, who’s first?”

Cassie pointed at me. “He’s in there already. Soon-to-be-ladies first.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Theresa retrieved a printed manual from a drawer. “This thing has a safety feature that prevents it from accidentally doing cross-gender makeovers. That’s the default. But the book *says* it has cross-dressing capability; we just never used it before.” She found a page toward the back and ran her finger down a list, then turned to the pod and opened a hidden panel beneath the screen. “Here’s the switch.” A muted *click* followed.

I swallowed hard. The machine was now in cross-dressing mode.

“You need to get naked,” Theresa said, pointing at me.

Cass touched the other girl’s shoulder. “Let’s give the guy some privacy.”

I’ve noticed that women tend to do that: a gentle touch now and then, to get their point across. Most often with each other; sometimes with a man they trust. I made a mental note to do that myself when I... became one of them.

“Leave your clothes *outside* the pod,” Theresa said. “Otherwise they’ll get wet. When you’re ready, just touch the big pink button beside the hatch.”

The glass door slid shut. I took a deep breath, skinned off my clothes and left them in a neat pile on the bench next to the pod. Another deep breath, then I touched the button. The hatch closed. Into darkness—?

Well, not quite. A dim red light came on, reminiscent of the lighting you might see in a submarine. Dive, dive! Then the pod opened its eyes.

They were just camera lenses, of course. The computer that runs the show has to *see* the client in order to perform the makeover. It made perfect sense, but it was still creepy as hell. *An auto-salon*, I thought, *what a silly idea*.

Then all hell broke loose.

That may be overstating the case, but it didn’t seem like it at the time. Four robotic limbs emerged from the walls, each tipped with a plastic cuff. The cuffs looped around my wrists and ankles, tightened their grip, then gently tugged my legs apart and my arms straight out from my sides.

“Please do not struggle. Restraints are required to properly position the target body for beautification.” The voice that filled the chamber was smooth, feminine and obviously artificial. “You will suffer no damage. If you wish to be released, you may say so at any time.”

“I *say*, I *say*! Let go of me, dammit!”

“Release override disabled. Commencing beautification.”

Another robotic limb held a nozzle that began spraying a waxy substance on my chest, arms and legs. A blast of warm air followed. Belatedly, I realized it *was* wax—and then, one strip at a time, it was torn from my body, taking the hair with it. I screamed, paused for breath, then screamed some more.

Theresa’s disembodied voice emerged from the speaker. “For god’s sake, Josh, don’t be such a *girl*. Women put up with this sort of thing all the time.”

Yeah, but didn’t happen so fast! My leg hair was disappearing quicker than butter in a frying pan. “Hey, you can *see* me? That’s not fair! I’m stuck—”

“Relax. All we can see is your head. Nothing naughty.”

I bit my tongue while the rest of the wax was removed. Then the nozzle was back, spraying my entire body with a lotion of some sort. At the same time, a mask was applied to my face. The computer told me to close my eyes and I did; it wasn’t worth the risk to find out what would happen otherwise. Fifteen minutes of sheer terror followed, as a pair of surprisingly soft robotic hands washed my hair and a sharp probe plucked at my eyebrows. At last the silicone was peeled off and I was washed with warm water. A tide of body hair swirled down the drain, leaving my skin smooth and silky-soft; or so I had to assume, my arms being pinned and all.

Warm air flowed through the pod. The restraints helped move my feet to aid the drying. Then things got weird. Okay, *weirder*.

A nozzle sprayed my crotch with a sticky substance. My junk was already hairless and looked smaller than before, which didn’t exactly enhance my masculine self-image. But what happened next made me cry out like a little girl. The soft hands came back: one grabbed my dick while the other gently forced my testicles up into my body—and in a maneuver that happened so fast I couldn’t track it, a prosthetic vagina—complete with a neat triangle of pubic hair—was stuck in place with ‘captain winky’ trapped underneath.

“C’mon, Josh, give it a rest. Women have to make sacrifices for beauty.”

That was Cassandra, but she was full of it. “They don’t have to sacrifice *this*,” I yelled. “What the hell is going on?”

“Relax, bro.” Theresa again. “The machine asked for the thing, so I gave it.”

“I bought it yesterday,” Cassie said. “Along with some other stuff you’re gonna love. There’s a factory down by the docks that 3D-prints these gizmos to spec—size, shape, skin color, everything. It’s really wild. I even got a prosthetic meat-stick for myself, and I simply cannot wait to see how it works.”

I was panicking. This was getting way out of hand. Sleeping with Cassie suddenly didn't seem so important. "I wanna go home," I whispered, as the robot limbs pulled me back onto the recliner. Metal restraints snapped into place around my wrists and ankles, and the cuffs withdrew. I don't think anyone heard me.

"Override disabled. 'Home' is not available. Feminization incomplete."

The mask returned, clamping onto my face like that thing in *Alien*. Maybe it was a different mask; who can tell? My skin recoiled, as though in horror, but there was nowhere for it to go. Feelers emerged from the mask to pierce and prod, suction and caress parts of my face—particularly around my eyes and mouth. A tentacle crawled down my throat. At the same time, two soft mounds pressed against my chest. They felt sticky, and they *stuck*. The edges were sprayed and smoothed with soft sponges. It didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on.

While the mask continued to alter my face, robotic hands worked on my hair. It was deftly dried and brushed out; tinted, set and blow-dried; then augmented with what felt like awfully long extensions. With the scent of hot glue trickling through the air-holes in the mask, I was pretty sure my new length and volume wouldn't be coming off anytime soon.

I gasped when the mask was peeled off. My face felt... different. My skin was taut and tingling, my lips slick, my eyelids heavy, and a veil of dark lines drooped into my field of view. My chest quivered with what appeared to be real breasts.

"Lookin' good, Josh." Cassie sounded pleased. "Told ya you were gonna love this stuff. The next guy that gropes you won't know the difference."

The clamps released my arms and legs, and I sat up. Long blonde hair hit the back of my neck and broke past my face. It blew me away how *much* of it there was! It wasn't as long as it felt—it only reached my upper chest—but the sheer volume of it encompassed both shoulders at the same time. Makeup aside, this much hair all by itself would identify me as a girl in the eyes of the world.

Not that my body wouldn't do the same. Looking down, past loose curls dancing on my chest, I could see a decent pair of headlights, a neat triangle of pubic hair topping the slit between my legs, and acres of smooth, baby-soft skin. If this was what Cass looked like in the buff... wow. She was gorgeous. And now, so was I.

The voice said, "Feminization complete. Beautification complete."

The pod's hatch cranked open. Theresa peered inside and whistled, long and low. "Male to female in under an hour. This thing is amazing."

Instinctively, I tried to cover myself; first my bikini zone, then with one arm flung across my chest. Both girls laughed. "Nothing we haven't seen before," Cass said. She was wearing a thick terrycloth robe, in dark blue.

“No one here but us gals,” Theresa said, grinning.

Mustering what dignity I could, I stepped out. “Is this what you wanted?” I asked Cassie. “I feel like a freak.” My eyes went wide: my voice sounded *female*.

“Sure is. But you’re not a freak—you’re *me*.”

I shook my head. “It’s impossible.” And yet I spoke like her.

“Let’s get you dressed.” Theresa picked up a pink brassiere, guided my arms through the straps, and fastened the clasp behind my back. “You’ll have to learn to do this yourself,” she added, settling my breasts in the cups.

In theory, a man can get used to darn near anything. I said as much.

She laughed. “You’ll get the hang.” She produced a lightweight waist trainer and wrapped it around my midsection. “Suck in that gut, girl. Don’t fight me.” She pulled the garment tight and secured the clasps.

Taking shallow breaths, I stepped into a pair of high-cut panties, then sat to unfurl a pair of nude stay-up stockings, rolling them up my legs. Was *this* what I’d have to do every day from now on, until this silly contest was over? Surely Cass didn’t wear such fancy lingerie *all* the time.

A hot pink slip dropped over my head. I drew it down my body, then stood. It fluttered past my hips, stopping just shy of my knees. Cassie smiled as she handed me the floral-pattern turquoise dress she’d been wearing, as if to say *this is yours now*. I stepped through the back and she zipped me up.

Cass wrapped a chunky crystal necklace around my throat. We locked eyes as she fastened the clasp. “It’s a cliché,” she said softly, “but it really is like looking in a mirror.” She dangled a pair of long crystal earrings from the lobes I’d had pierced the day before, as per our agreement.

I stepped into a pair of black stiletto pumps. They spritzed me with *eau de toilette*, then Cass presented me with a sterling silver ring—a turquoise stone set inside a fretwork of Celtic curves. “It was a gift when I turned twenty,” she said. “My parents will expect to see you wearing it.”

We left Cassie to undress and returned to the salon proper. There were four other women present: two stylists and two ladies having their hair done. None of them took any notice, in spite of me just having stepped off a spaceship from Mars. Or so I felt.

Theresa closed the glass door and turned to me. “Word to the wise, ‘Cassie’... you look like a girl—no doubt about *that*—but you still move like a guy. Too many straight lines, you know? Not enough curves.”

I stared at her, nonplussed. I had boobs, didn’t I?

“Here’s rule number one: don’t slouch. A lady does *not* do that.” She touched my chin. “Keep your head up; look people in the eye.” She ran a hand down my back. “Chest out, stomach in—no problem there, right? It’ll make your butt pop a bit, which creates a feminine figure. Also, relax your arms. Women’s shoulders slope more than men’s do, and you definitely want to avoid anything that suggests bulk. Not that *you* have much to worry about there.”


I tried to relax, pop my butt and thrust my chest, but it didn’t feel natural.

“Keep your arms closer to your body. Gaps only add to your apparent size.” She pointed to my legs. “Knees and feet forward, but don’t just stand there with both legs straight. That’s a masculine stance. Try shifting your weight on one leg and bend the other a little; that’s way more feminine.”

“I’ll try, but it’s a lot to think about—all at the same time.”

“Don’t tell the guys, but high heels are a girl’s best friend; better than diamonds. Until all this feels natural, don’t wear anything less than a three-inch heel, even at home. Just remember, women are graceful; it’s all about being fluid in how you move. Men, on the other hand, are stiff and jerky. No pun intended.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”



Okay, girls are fluid and graceful. I can do that. I just need to focus... focus on being a woman. Think... I am Cassie. This is my own hair, these are my clothes...

Amanda
Hawkins

I found a wall mirror at the back of the room and set to practicing. With my weight on one foot, I faced the mirror and shook back my newfound blonde tresses. They danced across my upper back before returning to envelop my shoulders. *Metallic* blonde, I reminded myself. That's what Cass herself told me, after her salon visit two weeks before. I wondered if *this* was what she had in mind, even then.

I tried prowling back and forth between the sink and a nearby salon chair, keeping my head up and my back straight. I caught the other women sneaking peeks, but I wrote it off as hairstyle envy. There was simply no way that any of them could've sussed me out as a guy.

I was sitting in the chair, legs crossed at the knee, practicing facial expressions in the mirror when a male voice growled: "Careful, Cass. Guys don't like women who are too hung up on themselves."

My head snapped around. Disconcertingly, I found myself facing *myself*. My old self, that is: Josh Wilks. He was wearing the same Coldplay *Head Full of Dreams* T-shirt I'd taken off earlier, as well as the faded jeans and battered pair of sneakers, and his longish-for-a-guy hair was styled exactly as mine had been before the auto-salon worked its magic. He even looked like he could use a shave. In other words, he didn't look—or sound—the least bit like Cassandra.

I ran a hand through my hair. "Looks like this contest is gonna go the distance, doesn't it?" I forced a smile onto my lips.

He laughed. "It's got legs, that's for sure." But he was staring at mine.

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Saturday morning. I awoke in Cassie's bed, sunlight streaming through canary-yellow curtains dotted with flowers. It took me a several long seconds to remember why I was there, but boobs are a pretty good clue.

I headed for the *en suite* and sat to relieve myself. I was wearing a periwinkle-blue babydoll, with my hair bound into a top-of-the-head ponytail using a heavy-duty banana clip. Josh had laughingly described it as 'pineapple hair', but the way it flowed up and spilled over made the hair look more like a fountain.

Nothing had changed during the night: I was still a girl. I was still Cassie. Without makeup, I could see something of my old self in and around my face, although the lack of facial hair still suggested *girl*. I wondered if that would change as the day wore on—or had the salon done more than simply shave my face? I was certainly smooth enough to pass for female.

I showered—with my hair covered—then dressed in the most casual clothes I could find: a pink T-shirt and yoga pants. Recalling Theresa's advice, I donned a pair of tan sandals with a tall-ish heel.

Unclipping my hair was an experience. I found myself awash in a sea of metallic blonde locks and getting all that under control took longer than getting dressed.

Downstairs, I found ‘Josh’ with his feet up in the living room, watching cartoons. He was wearing the same togs as the night before; his T-shirt looked like it had been slept in. Definitely getting the hang of being male.

He threw me a glance and smirked. “How’s the princess today? Didya find that pea I left under your mattress?”

Ha-ha. Turn a girl into a guy and suddenly she’s a comedian. “It’s all good. Slept like log.” I perched myself on the opposite end of the couch, mindful of keeping my back straight and my legs together. Pants or no, it’s a good habit to cultivate. I didn’t need Theresa to tell me that.

He scratched himself. “As logs go, babe, you chop up real nice.”

No point thanking him; it’s even money whether the compliment was directed at me or her old self. “So how do you wanna do this? We’re supposed to learn how to be each other, is that the idea?”

“That’s the idea. I’ve got until tomorrow night to teach you how to be a girly-girl. Pretty tall order, I’d say.”

“Yeah, like being a guy is a walk in the park for *you*.”

“Not a problem.” He picked his nose and ate it.

My stomach turned over. “I never did *that*, you know. I’m not—heck, *most* guys aren’t slobs who sit around in their underwear, scratching their butts. Most guys aren’t Homer Simpson.”

He shrugged. “Some guys are.”

“But I’m not! Josh isn’t! You act like *that* on campus and everyone’s gonna figure out fast that you aren’t—” I bit my tongue. If he wanted to act like a complete doofus, the game would be over quick-like on Monday.

“Sure, anyone who *knows* you could figure that out. How many guys is that? One or two? Those dorks at school? I’ve met ‘em. As long as I keep it together while they’re around, I can do whatever I want. Unlike *you*,” he said, jabbing a finger in my direction. “Everybody knows Cassandra Dahlman, by rep if nothing else. If you aren’t little miss perfect 24/7, they’ll suss you out faster than you can switch outfits.” He clicked the TV off and faced me. “Look, the deal stands. We both have to make an honest effort to show each other the ropes—how to be each other. Come Monday, we let the chips fall where they may. If you get found out because of something I *didn’t* teach you, then I lose the game. That’s a promise. And the same goes for you, of course.”

We shook on it. I couldn't help noticing that his hands were bigger than mine. Not by a lot, but even so—it was easy to tell the girl from the guy.

I spent the next day and a half repeatedly beautifying and cleansing my face. That seemed to be almost all there was to being female, although between our makeup sessions Josh quizzed me on cosmetic techniques, we watched an endless series of makeover videos on YouTube, and I learned the ins and outs of how to dress myself—what skirt goes with what blouse, how to match and contrast colors, how to accessorize, and what aspects of fashion are *in* at the moment. Getting *any* of that wrong, he assured me with a smirk, would end the game instantly.

We also spent time discussing Cassie's friends and reviewing her family history, which was surprisingly sparse. One thing that worked in my favor was that she and her parents weren't close. In fact, they rarely spoke. That sounded odd to me, but he just shrugged. "They're on the road a lot. Business stuff. Not a big deal. I'm pretty self-sufficient. That's what *you* need to be too," he added, and he lectured me on household procedures, like prepping my own food, what has to be cleaned, when laundry gets done, and so forth. It was a lot to take in.

I told him about my friends and a bit about my family, although I didn't expect the game to last long enough to include a trip home. I also talked about 'guy stuff', like when to shave and how to pee standing up, but he didn't seem concerned with learning any of it. That was okay by me; I'd done my job, and if he got tripped up on bathroom etiquette—whatever happens, do *not* look at the other guy's wang, *ever*—then he'd have to own it, simple as that.

Truthfully, though, Cass took to being a guy like a duck takes to water. It was hard to believe she'd ever been a girly-girl, but maybe *that* was a skill that hadn't come naturally. The new Josh had no problem being careless, slovenly, and even a little gross. I figured the contest was in the bag; or in my case, the purse.

Sunday night. Josh returned to my old residence room on campus, while I put my hair up, painted my nails and watched a rom-com on TV. On Monday morn, my new parents returned from wherever it was they were. I was a bundle of nerves when I minced downstairs, but neither of them batted an eyelash.

"You look lovely, dear," the mother said. "Is that a new polish?"

I told her it was. I also mentioned that I'd had a friend over on the weekend, but it was only Josh. Better they find out from me than have some nosy neighbor drop the dime. Not being a close family didn't necessarily mean permissive.

Mother just smiled. "That's all right. We trust you."

Father rolled his eyes. He was a big man, at least six-five, with hands the size of meat hooks and hair longer than mine. Just being in the same room terrified me.

I was also sweating bricks for my first class on campus, but I sat with a couple of Cassie's friends, dissed on guys, and otherwise took notes same as always. The rest of the week went the same way. It felt like being on-stage every time I minced across the quad, careful to keep my head up, back straight and feet aligned. I'm not sure how feminine it appeared, but the only looks I got were sideways and the lookers seemed to approve.

I saw Josh exactly three times, twice between classes and once in the library. He was always on his own, which hardly seemed fair; I was often in the company of one or two girlfriends. We never spoke to each other, but I could see him staring—and smirking. Staring and smirking weren't things *I* ever did when I was him, but if he kept it up somebody would notice and that would be game-over.

At home, Cassie's parents came as advertised. I saw them twice a day, at breakfast and after dinner, and they never once asked me about school or anything else. Did they care? I was starting to feel sorry for the erstwhile Cassandra Dahlman, even though she was pretty well off in a material sense.

On Saturday, we met for coffee off-campus. I expressed my surprise, and dismay, that the contest had not yet been decided. "I dunno how long I can keep this up," I told him. "I can handle the clothing and the makeup and all that stuff, and your parents aren't much of a challenge, but all this upkeep just takes so much time." I waved manicured fingers to indicate hair, face, dress, and the jewelry I'd spent ten minutes agonizing over that morning.

Josh laughed. "Really? That's the problem? When it comes to being a girl, you're killin' it, Cass. You're knockin' it outta the park. What's not to like about bein' a gorgeous chica? Dudes line up to ask you out. Had a big date yet?"

"Are you kidding? I had to tell three guys I was drowning in homework."

"Only three?" He pointed at me. "You need to loosen up. Forget homework, just have some fun. How often do you get to be the girl?"

"Yeah, you'd like that. Nothing would trip me up faster than pretending to *like* some dumbass jock while he's putting the moves on me."

"So don't pretend. As far as anyone knows, you *are* a girl. On a related subject," he added, "I was thinking that maybe we could write a term paper for Psych class. The topic," he added, "would be gender differences and how tough it is for transgender folks to cross the line—given all the hidden assumptions about how men and women are supposed to act."

I was dubious. "A paper? We don't even know they'd approve the topic."

"I mentioned it to the prof, in a roundabout way. She said it was 'fascinating', and we might even be able to get it published. Wouldn't *that* be something?"

I thought about it, I really did. Trouble is, it would mean admitting that I'd been successfully passing myself off as a girl for days or weeks on end. How could I ever live that down? Reputation: dead and buried.

Josh waved off my objections. "I've been taking notes. You should too." I didn't bother doing so, but the Imitation Game continued. Right up until the following Thursday night, when all hell came a'calling.

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I had just finished watching *Legally Blonde*—which was actually pretty good—on Netflix, when I heard a violent crash from the rear of the house. My bed quivered in response. It sounded like the back door being kicked in, but that made no sense. We lived in a good neighborhood. Insofar as I knew from watching television, doors being kicked in was something that happened in low-income 'hoods.

Then I heard gunfire, and broken doors ceased to be a concern. My first impulse was to hide under the covers, but what good would *that* do? The shots from downstairs weren't coming down like hail; they were sporadic, like two groups of cowboys sniping at each other from opposite sides of a saloon.

Quiet as a mouse, and careful to avoid the floorboard that squeaked, I left the bed and crept into Cassie's closet. Not the greatest hiding spot—it *would* be searched, if it came to that—but miles better than blankets. I found a spot to stand behind her over-stuffed shoe tree and drew the door shut. With the lights off, maybe whoever came a'looking would think the room unoccupied.

No such luck. Heavy footsteps rumbled up the staircase, pursued by more bullets than any one handgun could hold. The door to my room burst open—didn't these clowns ever use doorknobs?—and a volley of bullets shredded the air. It sounded like my bed took the hit—okay, Cassie's bed, but after sleeping in it for ten-plus nights I'd developed a certain attachment—and I silently congratulated myself on my choice of hiding places.

Spoke too soon. Gunfire raked the closet door. I was hit: face it, there's only so much three dozen pairs of high heels can offer by way of protection. Red-hot *pain* lanced through my shoulder. I never—felt *any*—thing like—

More gunshots, but not from the same place. They came from the hallway outside my—all right, Cassie's—bedroom, aimed at whoever was inside.

I slipped to my knees, one hand clutching my shoulder, fingers wet with blood. A hailstorm of bullets tore the shoe tree apart. My head jerked to the side. Long metallic blonde hair fell across my face, reminding me of—

My throat. I clutched at my neck. Wetness—warmth—blood. Then I fell, and the world swirled into absence.

~

I awoke as the paramedics lifted me onto a gurney. My neck and shoulder were heavily bandaged. Mother's face hove into view. "Don't worry, honey, we got all three of those ass—the bad guys. They won't bother you again." Her hair was a mess, but otherwise she didn't look hurt. Beyond her I saw Father with an large automatic weapon slung over his shoulder, conversing with a police officer. He threw a glance my way, and winked.

Who *were* these people? All along I thought they were just professionals of some sort; lawyers or project managers, or sales reps for a multinational. All right, that might be a stretch for Father, who looked more like the leader of a drug-crazed motorcycle gang. Were they just regular folks with a fetish for heavy weaponry? No shortage of *them* in the country, of course... but did that mean the 'bad guys' simply picked the wrong house to burgle?

My thoughts ran in circles. No, it wasn't a burglary—they were trying to *kill* me! All right, *Cassie*, dammit—they were trying to murder Cassandra Dahlman and they foolishly mistook me for her, for no reason other than I looked exactly like her and was pretending to *be* her. Silly buggers.

Then they gave me something for the pain and the world went all fuzzy.

Consciousness returned with the speed of a turtle crossing a country lane. Sunlight streamed through the windows of what looked to be a hospital room, in which I was the only occupant. At some point a nurse came by, took note of the change in my awareness, and fetched a lady doctor.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," she said with practiced cheer. "Don't try to speak," she hastened to add as I opened my mouth.

She pulled up a chair. "I won't keep you in suspense. You were hit twice. One bullet passed through your shoulder, but thankfully didn't damage any major blood vessels, so that will heal up nicely. The other bullet grazed your throat. The injury wasn't overly serious, but it did impact your vocal chords. That's why you won't be able to talk for awhile." She smiled. "I don't want you to worry, though. Your voice may not sound exactly the same, but the surgeon who patched you up made sure to tune the ligaments nice and tight to ensure that your vocal pitch will be well into the female range."

Oh God. These people thought I was a real girl! Frantically, I gestured at my neck and shook my head. *Fix this!*

The doctor stood up. "I'm afraid I can't let you have any water just yet. We have you on a drip, so you won't get dehydrated. Don't worry, Cassie, I'm sure you'll be chatting with your girlfriends again in a week or two."

My so-called parents never bothered to visit, nor did any of my—or rather Cassie’s—friends. I later learned that anyone who asked was told I was sick and could not be disturbed. But I did receive an unexpected visitor in the form of a tall brunette with a no-nonsense bob who greeted me like we were pals.

“Hello, Cassie. Remember me?” When I shook my head, she flashed a grim smile. “Guess I deserved that. I’m sorry you got hurt. I have no idea how the Zebrewski gang got wind of your whereabouts, but your ‘parents’ took care of the gunmen. We’re pretty proud of them down at the Bureau. Semi-retired for five years, but good agents never lose their instincts.”

I stared at her. Agents? The Bureau? Air-quotes around ‘parents’?

She sat down. “Big part of the problem, I suspect, is that you were never properly placed in your new life. It must’ve been terribly difficult, pretending to be a girl while knowing full well you weren’t one.” She placed her hand on my arm. “I did argue for the surgery five years ago, but it came at the end of our fiscal year and my boss just didn’t have the budget.”

Maybe it was the painkillers, but my head was spinning. This lady assumed that I was Cassandra, but—Cass was *pretending* to be a girl? What the hell?

“But all that’s changed. Even though the rest of the gang is in jail and you should be safe, this time the government is going to do right by you.” She smiled and her grip tightened. “You’re going to be a real *woman*, Cassie. No more pretending, no more fake breasts, no more prosthetics. Isn’t that wonderful? I know you never wanted this in the beginning, but it really *was* the appropriate corrective for the assault you committed. Testifying against the gang was fine, but that poor girl still deserved some measure of justice. However, I’m told you’ve adapted so well to your life as a girl—why, it barely counts as punishment anymore, does it?”

A woman? I didn’t want to be a woman! For God’s sake, it was just a *game*!

“We arranged for the finest SRS surgeon in the country to attend. He arrived this morning. Your reassignment surgery is set for—” She checked her watch. “Looks like they’ll be here to prep you in a few minutes.”

Time to panic. I clutched at her sleeve, looked around for something to write on; eyes wide, pointing at my throat; mimed writing in the air—all to no avail.

“You’ll be fine,” she said. “Everything’s taken care of. We created a whole new identity for you, one the Zebrewskis will *never* hear about. Your new name will be ‘Missy’. You won’t be an American anymore, but—next best thing, right? I really can’t go into details just now, but suffice to say that your new favorite sport will be ice hockey. Go Jets!”

A moment later, in a swirl of chic *eau de cologne*, she was gone.

I slumped back against the pillows. What could I do? I had to contact Josh—the real Cassandra, that is. But how? I had no writing materials, no phone, no way to communicate. And what good would it do? Cassie herself wasn't even a girl. Who the hell was she—or *he*?

That's when it hit me: Cass had never been a girl. She was male, and that meant pretending to be Josh would be—well, pretty damn easy. And with me about to become female for keeps, she... *he* had effectively stolen my life!

I spent the next few minutes ruing my new position as World's Biggest Chump.

Then the nurses arrived to prepare me for surgery, and in spite of my best efforts to 'charade' the truth they administered a sedative—and out went the lights.

When next I woke, nearly nine hours later, I was a woman.

~

In the years that followed, I often imagined tracking the bastard down, perhaps in the office where he toiled as a mid-level manager, despised by bosses and workers alike. Or maybe I'd find him under the hood of a car in a small-town garage, his hands forever filthy with grease. I did enjoy that one.

I'd stride into his workplace, my long metallic blonde hair flowing, impeccably made-up, fashionably clad in form-fitting dress and 'fuck-you' heels, and I'd fix him with a stern glare—pinning him down like a bug on a stick—and I'd say, "Hey loser, I used to be *you*! But look at me *now*." And him? Why, he'd wring his filthy hands and stare at the floor and stammer, "Oh my Lord, C-Ca-Cassie? Is that really you? You're so wonderfully sexy and ever so pretty. I'm sorry!"

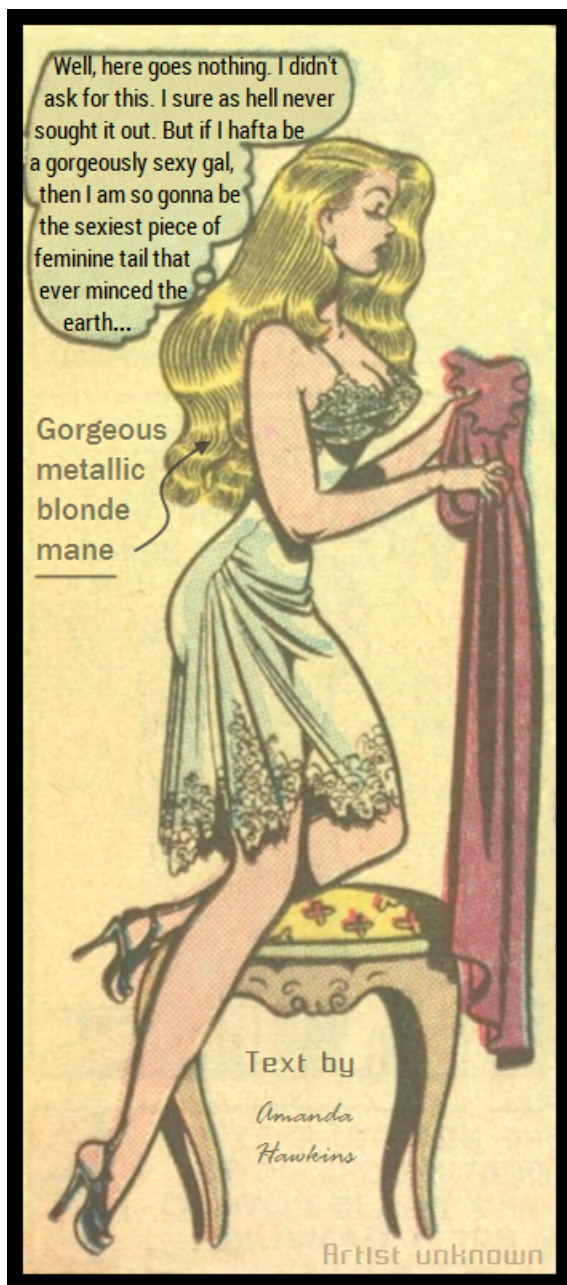
But I never did. It's one of those things you think about doing, but never quite get around to. Life gets in the way. Regrets happen.

What I *did* do, once I accepted who and what I had become, was marry—for love, if you must know. Conrad was a good man, nothing at all like I imagined the new and impoverished Josh Wilks to be. My husband and I adopted two wonderful children and raised them like our own flesh and blood, and they in their turn made me a grateful grandmother.

Now that I find myself here, at the end of all things, I am moved to admit what I never could before, lest *he* take any small solace from the selfish act he visited upon me. Before the god of Fate, let my dying declaration be this: It was a good life. It just wasn't the one I expected.

Long ago, I chose the high road. Whoever he was, I forgave him. ●

Epilog: Message in A Bottle



This letter was discovered among the effects of the late Theresa Wilks, by her son Granville. It is believed to have been written by Theresa's deceased husband Josh Wilks, before their marriage, apparently at the behest of a psychiatrist. The events implied by the letter's contents cannot be verified.

Dear (former) Josh:

I'm sorry for what I did to you. Years ago I did a really dumb thing and got involved with a nasty bunch of criminals. I testified against the gang, but while I was working for them I hurt a girl real badly and to punish me the judge made me become a girl too. I lived as a girl for five years. I tried hard to make it work, but I finally couldn't take it any more. When I met you and saw how girly you were, I figured you'd be able to handle it a lot better than I ever could. Sure hope I was right. It's been bugging me ever since, the way I forced you into it. All I can say is, I really hope you have a good life as a woman. I guess I'll never know.

*Sorry for everything,
(current) Josh Wilks*

*(former Cassandra,
former Calvin) ■*