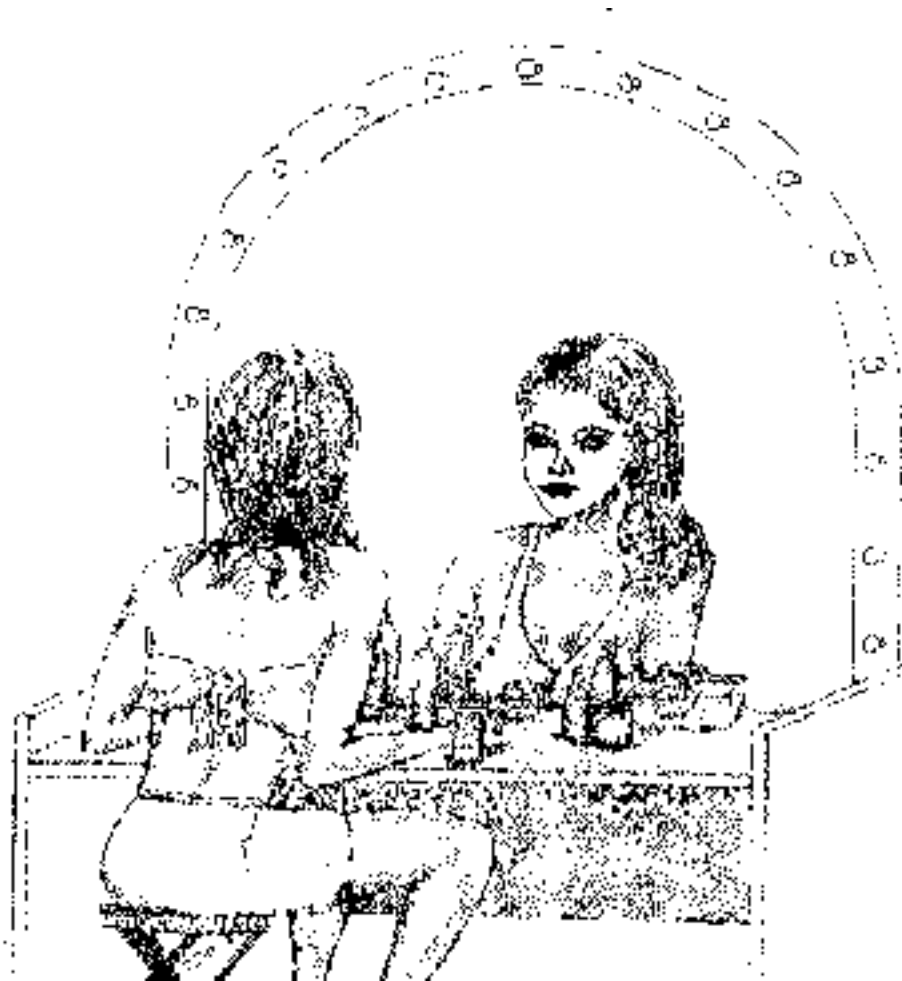


THE VOLUNTEER

By Jessica Matthews



ILLUSTRATED BY T. F. MORGAN

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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THE VOLUNTEER

By Jessica Matthews.

“Come in, Brother Benjamin, sit down.”

The young cleric stepped nervously towards the solitary vacant chair before the Abbot's desk. He was unused to being called from his menial duties for any reason, let alone an interview by the head of the Order.

“We have been approached by one of our former brethren who works in the city.” The Abbot paused. “He leads a mission in what is called a ”red light" district. Do you know what that is.”

“Yes, Father,” Benjamin confessed. “I have never been in such an area, but I am familiar with the term.”

“He has most particular requirements,” the Abbot continued. “We were asked to find a young man with certain physical characteristics. You are the nearest we have.”

“What am I to do, Father.” Benjamin asked.

“I do not know, not exactly, anyway.” The Abbot seemed reluctant to meet Benjamin's eye. “He has a lot to explain to you. He wants you to help trace some of his friends who have disappeared in most particular circumstances.”

“I'm not a detective,” Benjamin answered.

“No, and neither are the police on this occasion. I gather they would take no interest in such cases, largely because of the poor unfortunates concerned. That's where you'll come in.” There was a long pause again. “Do you remember your vows, Benjamin?”

“I do, Father.” he replied. “Poverty, chastity and obedience, to follow the rules of my order and to serve those needing my service.”

“That is correct.” The Abbot seemed to look through Benjamin as he thought, then his piercing eyes turned on him with all their wisdom and intensity. “You are to serve me in undertaking these tasks in the city. In that you will find service. You are freed from your vows, wherever it is necessary to accomplish these tasks.”

Benjamin was shocked to hear these words. He had struggled with himself so deeply before making his final vows. Now he was being freed from them altogether.

“What am I to do, father?” he asked.

“Brother Henry is waiting for you in my study. He will explain your task,” The Abbot spoke solemnly. “If you feel totally unable to help him you may return here to me. I hope this will not be the case. If you accept, you shall leave with him, and we may not meet again for some time. You have my blessing.”

Benjamin realized that he was dismissed. Standing, he bowed in reverence to receive his Abbot's blessing, then turned and walked from the room, and into the study.

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The study was warm, and a welcoming log fire was burning as Benjamin walked in. He had only been allowed in here once before, and that was to deliver wood. His eyes took in the comfortable furnishings and then he noticed the spare cleric watching him from one of the fireside chairs. He arose to greet him, extending his hand.

"You must be Benjamin," he noted, taking his hand. "I'm Henry." He stepped back to look at Benjamin more closely. "I asked them to find me someone like you. I must say, you look just right for what I have in mind."

"You'll have to forgive me, Father," Benjamin responded. "I have been instructed that I should undertake whatever task you have for me, but I have no idea what it is."

"I'm aware of that." Henry smiled at him. "Please sit down. I think you'll need to, whilst I explain everything. I believe your Abbot has told you that you may be freed from your vows and that you may not be able to return here afterwards."

"Yes, he did," Benjamin replied. "I have no idea why, but I know he wanted me to help you."

"Right, there's no easy way to tell this story," Henry began. "So just sit back and listen. Firstly, I think you know I run a mission in the city, in the "red light" area. It's not every cleric's idea of a good job, but some one's got to do it, and I like to think I serve those who need friends and comfort more than most."

"It must be hard work," agreed Benjamin.

"It is," Henry continued. "Given the nature of the people there and the way they come and go, It's very much a shifting population, so when people disappear, there's nothing unusual about it. There are people on the run, people hiding from their families, people who work in the sex industry. they're a mixed lot."

"It must be very difficult to get to know people," Benjamin suggested.

"Yes, but there are always some you do get to know better than others," Henry agreed. "That's why you and I are here. Some years ago, I had a good friend who worked in one of the clubs. He was quite a good friend, and I was most surprised when he disappeared. I took it that there must have been reasons, and after a while thought nothing of it. A couple of years later, another chap disappeared."

"There was a connection."

"Yes, there was. He had followed the other into the same job. They were very similar in a lot of ways. I began to take notice at this coincidence, and you can imagine my surprise when a third disappeared from exactly the same job."

Henry paused, as if collecting his thoughts.

"In each case, there was no warning, no hint that a disappearance was contemplated, and not a single word afterwards. They all disappeared without trace."

"Did no one know what happened to them?" Benjamin asked.

“No one at all. I asked the police, but they weren't interested. There was nothing to suggest that anything criminal had happened, and an inquiry from someone like me carried no weight at all. They asked a couple of questions, but no answers were ever forthcoming.”

“What about the job, you said they all had the same job before they disappeared.” Benjamin was getting interested in the mystery.

“I asked there,” Henry assured him. “I asked in the club, where they had all worked, and spoke to as many of the people in the place as I could, but those who would talk to me knew nothing at all. I genuinely believe that. I think the club owners knew what was going on, and as time has passed I think they know far more.”

“More in what way.”

“I know they regard me as a meddling old fool, but I suspect them of being involved in these disappearances.” Henry looked up at Benjamin. “I think they're behind this mystery, but I can't prove it yet.”

“Is that why you want me to help?”

“Yes, but it's not what prompted me.” Henry continued. “Some months ago, I got to know a young couple who came to work in my area. Lisa was, and is, a bright young woman, who was making her way in the world. She was building a theatrical agency of her own after working for a larger concern in the city center. She supplied acts to the better clubs in my area. Her boy friend, Alan, was a real character, good hearted and charitable, but unfortunately, he took the job from which the others had disappeared.”

“And he disappeared as well.”

“Yes, without warning, and without trace,” Henry responded. “This was really wrong. I knew he would not have willingly done such a thing. I went to the club myself and confronted the owners as Lisa had done before me, but we both got the same story. He had absconded with his boy friend, they said.”

“Boy friend,” Benjamin repeated.

“Yes, that is what I said.” Henry looked up at him. “I did explain that this was an area where sex is a commodity. Boy friends are not unusual.”

“No,” mumbled Benjamin. “I know that, I just wondered...”

“You wondered why this was significant,” Henry added. “Well, neither Lisa nor I could accept this explanation. Lisa, because she knew her man. Me, well I knew about the others who had disappeared before. I decided it was time to do something.”

“Did you ask the police for help,” Benjamin asked the obvious.

“Yes, both Lisa and I went to them, but all we got was a perfunctory inquiry. They had nothing to go on, no reason to doubt that he had just left. It was that finality which made me ask for help.”

“And that's where I come in,” Benjamin noted. “But why me. I'm not a detective or anything, and why did you ask for someone with my physical description. Why did the Abbot free me from my vows, and warn me that I may not be able to return here.”

“These are too many questions for tonight,” Henry answered. “I have to refuse to reply to your questions until I have your decision. Will you undertake the task I have in mind for you. It may be dangerous. It will be like nothing you ever imagined. You may not be able to return, indeed you may not wish to return. You are my best hope, but I cannot reveal more in case you decide you would rather stay here. If you decline, I shall have to find someone else, so the less people who know what's going on, the more secure my plans will be.”

“I understand,” Benjamin said. “I will accept, even though I have no idea what I am going to do.”

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Next morning, Benjamin and Henry were waved off by the Abbot. Henry, driving a rented car, with very little luggage, and his passenger with no luggage at all, rode in silence for the first few miles. Benjamin knew he had volunteered for something momentous, even though he had no idea of the details. He felt nervous and was alone with his thoughts as the miles passed by. He wished they had allowed him to bring some of his few possessions, but he had none, even the clothes he stood in had been provided by Henry.

“I have arranged a room where you may meet Lisa and then I hope you may prepare in peace for our task,” Henry noted, breaking the silence.

“I have brought nothing with me,” Benjamin said, feeling the strangeness of the worn jeans against his legs. He had been wearing a clerical habit for so long, he had forgotten what ordinary clothes felt like. He wore only the jeans, a denim jacket, and a pale green tee shirt, with open sandals. His only underwear was a small pair of briefs, and he had nothing to change into.

“I know, you will need nothing from the past,” Henry assured him.

“Can you tell me what I am to do. I have waited patiently, I think It's time you leveled with me.”

“You're right, of course,” Henry agreed. “I hope now that I have your consent, you won't want to withdraw.”

“I still have my vow of obedience,” Benjamin assured him.

“Yes, you do.” Henry smiled to himself. “Right are you ready for this?”

“I need to know.”

“What I didn't tell you was that the men who disappeared were female impersonators.”

“So that was what they had in common,” Benjamin exclaimed.

“Not only were they female impersonators, they were very good female impersonators,” Henry continued. “They had taken their impersonation to some lengths.”

“I don't understand,” Benjamin replied. “What do you mean, how had they taken their impersonation to....whatever you said....great lengths.”

“Well they looked like women.”

“Okay, they would have to,” Benjamin replied, “what's special about that.”

“I mean they had almost become women....to look at. They had women's figures and hair, they had breasts, they could not look like men, even if they wanted to.”

“But they were still men.”

“Yes, they were still men,” Henry replied. “Don't just take my word for it, Lisa will tell you the same about her Alan. He had all his male parts, all in working order....That is before he disappeared.”

“So where do I come in,” asked Benjamin, suddenly getting a nervous feeling rising from the pit of his stomach.

“You're going to follow them, to see if you disappear, and if you do, where you disappear to.”

“But I'm not a female impersonator,” Benjamin started to say, then he realized why he had not been told all the details before now. “You mean that I'm going to be a female impersonator too.”

“Yes, I do Benjamin, that's why there was this absolute need for secrecy,” Henry replied. “If your colleagues had heard of this, there would have been no way of preventing them gossiping a little, and I want absolute secrecy.”

“But my brothers would not have given anything away,” Benjamin protested.

“I don't want to take any risk,” Henry said. “Walls have ears sometimes.”

“But if I disappear just like the others,” Benjamin asked, “how will you know where I am. I may not be allowed to contact you. I may not be able to get a message to you. What happens then?”

“I know. Don't think I haven't thought of that. I've no satisfactory answer yet.”

“What about a rescue beacon, like the yachtsmen have?” asked Benjamin.

“What about if they don't let you take anything with you,” countered Henry. “Remember there's never been any warning before the disappearances. Even if you were to have a beacon, you may be searched. It would be thrown away, or set off as a decoy. No, I'm still working on that one. We'll try and keep you out of harm's way until there's some solution.”

“What if it takes a long time.”

“Then you'll have had time to become a really good female impersonator, and who knows, you may be making a fortune.” Henry smiled sardonically at the thought. “I really don't want to put you in danger. The problem of finding you if we manage to get you into a position where you disappear is one which I shall have to solve.”

Benjamin was still struggling to come to terms with what had been revealed to him. His mind was turning over and over the little information which had been revealed. He tried to take everything in, and imaging just what he was being asked to do. One side of his brain shouted for him to get out, to escape whilst he still could with his sanity, and his body, still intact. The other side reminded him of his vow of obedience. It was the only one left to him now, and he had accepted the task which now lay before him.

“What will become of me then, Father,” he asked quietly. “Must I become female in my appearance too.”

“Yes,” Henry answered bluntly.

Benjamin was silent for a few moments. “Will I have to have women's hair and breasts.”

“Yes, you will,” Henry replied. “If you're going to disappear like the others, you'll have to be exactly like them. It will take time and work for you to become not just a female impersonator, but a good enough one to be employed in the club from which they disappeared.”

“What sort of work were they doing?”

“They were the main act, the star of the show.”

“But I'm not a star,” Benjamin protested. “I've never even been on the stage, even at school.”

“No, that doesn't matter,” Henry assured him. “Lisa is the best one to tell you how you're going to achieve stardom, she'll be looking after you, not me. All I know is that you'll get there. It may take a year or even longer, but you're the only hope we've got.”

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Eventually, the car pulled into the drive of a motel. Henry avoided the reception area, and drove round the back. He seemed to be looking for a particular number, and when he found it, pulled in next to a limousine. As he stopped, the door of the motel room opened, and without waiting to explain, Henry got out and beckoned for Benjamin to follow.

“Come in, Benjamin. Close the door, this is Lisa, and this is where you and I part company. Lisa will look after you. If we meet, should I say when we meet again, you must remember that we do not know each other. Stay in character at all times.” Henry held out his hand, Benjamin took it, and received his blessing. Then he was gone, leaving Benjamin alone with the lady introduced as Lisa.

“Hello, you're Benjamin,” she greeted, smiling. She walked towards him, holding out her hand for him to take. He took it, and before he could react she had pulled him towards her and was kissing him on each cheek. “As far as you're concerned, I'm your Doctor Frankenstein. You can be Benjamin for a few moments more, then no more.”

“What do you mean?” asked Benjamin, too stunned to take it all in.

“I mean, we start here. We start right now. No more Benjamin.”

“If I'm not to be Benjamin, who am I to be. I don't understand.” He could hear that he sounded confused as he spoke.

“I mean all the female impersonators, well the really serious ones like you're going to be, take girl's names. Benjamin isn't a girls name, therefore, no more Benjamin. you've got to get in character, and stay there.” Lisa commanded. “Have you thought what name you'd like to be called.”

“No, I never thought about it, Henry never mentioned...,” he stumbled through the words, then a thought struck him forcefully. “If you're Doctor Frankenstein, and I'm to be your monster, then you should name me.”

“I'd never thought of that. I agree though, I'm in command of this experiment,” she giggled a little at the thought, and at once the atmosphere between them lightened.

“Who am I?” he asked.

“Wait, I'm thinking, you've got to have a real girl's name, nothing half way, nothing that could be used for a boy as well. How about Susan, there's no mistaking that name.” She thought for a moment, “that's it, you'll be Susan from now on. I shall recreate you as Susan from this moment. Now tell me who you are.”

“I am Susan,” he said, feeling a little strange as the thought settled into his consciousness. “I am Susan.” he repeated it again with more conviction.

“Yes you are. From now on, that's what you respond to, that's how you think of yourself. don't let it slip, not even for an instant.”

“I guess you're not going to let me,” he replied.

“No I'm not, and forget the monster bit too.” Lisa smiled at him for the first time, “you're going to be so beautiful, you'll stop traffic before I've finished with you, my girl.”

“I can't believe this,” he mused aloud, the force of all that had been revealed was hitting home for the first time. “What have I let myself in for?”

“You've let yourself in, as you put it, for an interesting time. From now on you're going to have to get into a totally different mind set. You have to learn quickly, and you have to learn well.”

“I can understand that,” **Susan** replied. “I can't think that I know anything remotely useful to what I'll have to do.”

“You probably don't,” Lisa agreed. “But let's set out to enjoy this. you're here to help me. Henry fixed that, but you're not only helping me, you're helping Alan as well. I thought I was falling apart when he disappeared, only Henry kept me together.”

Susan saw Lisa's eyes filling with tears as she spoke. She was unable to speak for a few moments, and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“Tell me about Alan,” Susan urged, wanting her to get it out of her system.

“He was fun,” Lisa replied. “He was exceptional, I know he would never have left of his own accord. That's what keeps me going, that and Henry's determination to find out....”

She broke off to wipe her eyes again.

“Please tell me,” Susan insisted. “It will help me to understand.”

“We met a few times before we got together. I was a singer for a while, then moved into being a road manager, then manager of the group as it became more successful. The group split up, and I moved into working for an agency. This was over three years or so,” Lisa began, her voice getting stronger as she spoke.

“Go on. Take your time, I want to understand.”

“Well, in the agency, we represented all kinds of acts. Alan was an unsuccessful singer, then a bit part actor. He was always willing and ambitious, so I tried to get him what work I could. When there was nothing else, he started to do a bit of stand up, you know, as a comedian. He wasn't the greatest, but it was work.”

“So how did he come to be successful as a female impersonator,” Susan asked gently.

“That was my fault. We had been dating a few times. I had to pay, he had no work at all. He was quite desperate. One day, I mentioned that we had an inquiry for an act, and that we had none on the books, he said he would do it.”

“Just like that?” Susan asked. “Surely, it's not something you can do without a lot of preparation?”

“That's just it. Alan told me that he had done an act before, whether it was true or not, I never knew, anyway, I wanted to get him the work, so I booked him. He had a couple of weeks to get an act together. He wouldn't let me near, and I was banned from the first few nights. I was so nervous for him. I needn't have worried. When he eventually invited me to come, his act was quite good really, but the thing which made it really take off was the way he looked. As a man he was nothing special. As a girl, he had a totally different personality. On stage it was a knockout.”

“Was he a natural?”

“Yes, I guess he was. He confessed that he had always liked dressing up, and that the excuse was just what he wanted.” Lisa smiled to herself as she remembered. “As a man, he was never going anywhere, as a female impersonator, he was a great act.”

“You must miss him a lot,” Susan suggested softly.

“I do,” Lisa replied. “But I have to keep going. I fell apart after he disappeared, but I have my own agency now. If I fall apart for long, I lose my business, and a lot of people who rely upon me lose out as well. Henry was a great strength. He didn't believe Alan had just up and left. He believed in him as I did, and he taught me that the only way to solve the mystery was his way.”

“That's why I'm here, right.”

“Yes. I pretended I believed the story about Alan going off with a boy friend. I cursed him, swore to get even. It was all for public consumption. I wanted to get my acts back into the club where it all happened. I know the key to this mystery is there. I had to make them believe I was going along with all the crap they were telling me. It's working. that's why you're here.”

Lisa stood and walked over to Susan. She took his head in her hands and softly kissed his forehead.

“Thank you,” she said. “I needed to get that out of my system. Now we can move on.”

“Tell me what to do,” Susan announced with a chuckle. “Your monster - or whatever - awaits.”

“All I want to do here is to change your basic appearance from male to female. Just a few things to change, and we're on our way. You're coming back with me as my protégé, my new star to be, so you've got to look the part from the moment we arrive.”

She stood up and went over to a canvas bag which was lying on the bed. From it she pulled several packages which she sorted through.

Susan saw that some were clothes, more exactly women's underwear which he recognized from pictures. He'd never been this close to such garments before. He saw a large make up bag, which Lisa opened and began to arrange across the vanity unit.

“How often do you have to shave,” she asked.

“I shaved this morning,” Susan replied. “I usually just do it every two or three days.”

Lisa felt his chin.

“You'll have to do it every day until I can get it fixed,” she instructed. “I'll get the electrolysis booked as soon as we get back. They can tidy you up quite efficiently, but until then, every day, and very carefully.”

“Do you mean you're going to remove my beard altogether?”

“Yes, totally,” Lisa answered, “Now get those clothes off and let's move.”

Susan felt self conscious, but removed his clothes whilst Lisa busied herself with the cosmetics again. When he stood naked, she looked at him in a business like manner, and walked round him looking carefully, as if working out what she had to do. Seeming to snap out of this concentration, she took a flesh colored garment from the pile she had sorted out. She held it out for him to step into.

“What's this?”

“It's a gaff.” Lisa replied. “It's designed to keep your male bits out of the way, and give you a smooth profile at the front. Don't be shy, it will feel strange at first, but you'll soon get used to it.”

Susan felt the strong elastic pulling as Lisa gently eased it up his legs. He wriggled to help, and then felt her fingers pushing as it reached his maleness. She pushed back and up, forcing his parts back into his body, and his penis backwards, where it was held in place, tightly strapped back between his legs.

“I can't breathe,” Susan whispered hoarsely. “I don't know how you expect me to move in this.”

“Take your time, move slowly and carefully.”

She supported Susan as he stood, straightening up gently. She remained by his side, supporting his weight, encouraging him to walk a few steps. He did so, gingerly at first, wincing at the constriction, but gradually he felt it ease and the pain subsided. He began to take bigger steps as Lisa encouraged him to move more easily, to relax and breathe more naturally. She took advantage of his relief to slip some panties over his legs and gently settled them in place.

“These are the reason you're wearing the gaff. Look at the shape you have.”

Susan looked down and saw just how the panties settled around his hips and clung there as if he had always been wearing them. They were high cut on the legs, and where it mattered, smooth and feminine in profile. The color, a gentle and highly feminine peach had been chosen specially for the occasion. There was nothing male made in such a pretty color.

Susan had little time to recover, before Lisa was telling him to hold out his arms. He obeyed and felt her slipping a bra over them. He watched as the garment which matched the panties was secured behind his shoulders, and could say nothing as Lisa placed breast shapes into each of the cups. Eventually he found his voice.

“This feels weird,” he said softly. “Do women really wear these things.”

Lisa laughed at the absurdity of the remark. “Not only do they wear them, they grow them.” She laughed again. “And they’re fun, and they feel good. Get used to them, you’ll have your own before long.”

“Before long. What do you mean?”

“I mean that before too long, you’ll be having implants. you’ll be having breasts yourself,” Lisa commented in a matter of fact way.

“I can’t. I’m a man, I’m the wrong shape.”

“That’s why you’ll be having the implants.” Lisa looked at him seriously. “That’s the common factor in all the disappearances. The female impersonator has been male, not turned into a female by hormones, but they all had some plastic surgery. They could never have passed as men because of all the things they did to themselves, but they weren’t female. That’s what you’re going to be. Didn’t Henry explain all this to you.”

“No, he didn’t,” Susan admitted. “The Abbot said something about me being changed so that I might not be able to go back, but I never guessed that was what he meant.”

“To be fair, I don’t think Henry knows just what’s involved in becoming the type of female impersonator you’re going to be,” Lisa observed gently. “If it seems too much, tell me and we’ll stop now.”

“No,” Susan replied decisively. “I gave my word to see this through. I’m in it to the end.” He looked at her with confusion in his eyes. “But I’ll need help to know what I’m doing. I’m not a very worldly person.”

Lisa softened to him. She put her arms around him gently. It was the first time he had been this close to a woman in years. He liked the feeling. He liked it when she stroked the back of his head and whispered.

“Don’t worry, I’ll look after you.”

They pulled apart slowly. Lisa turned as if self conscious all of a sudden. She handed him the shirt and jeans he had been wearing when he arrived.

He put them back on, and then slid his feet back into the sandals as well. There was such a little change, but now his form had been altered in subtle ways. He looked in the mirror, and could imagine that the body he was seeing was that of a young female, not his own.