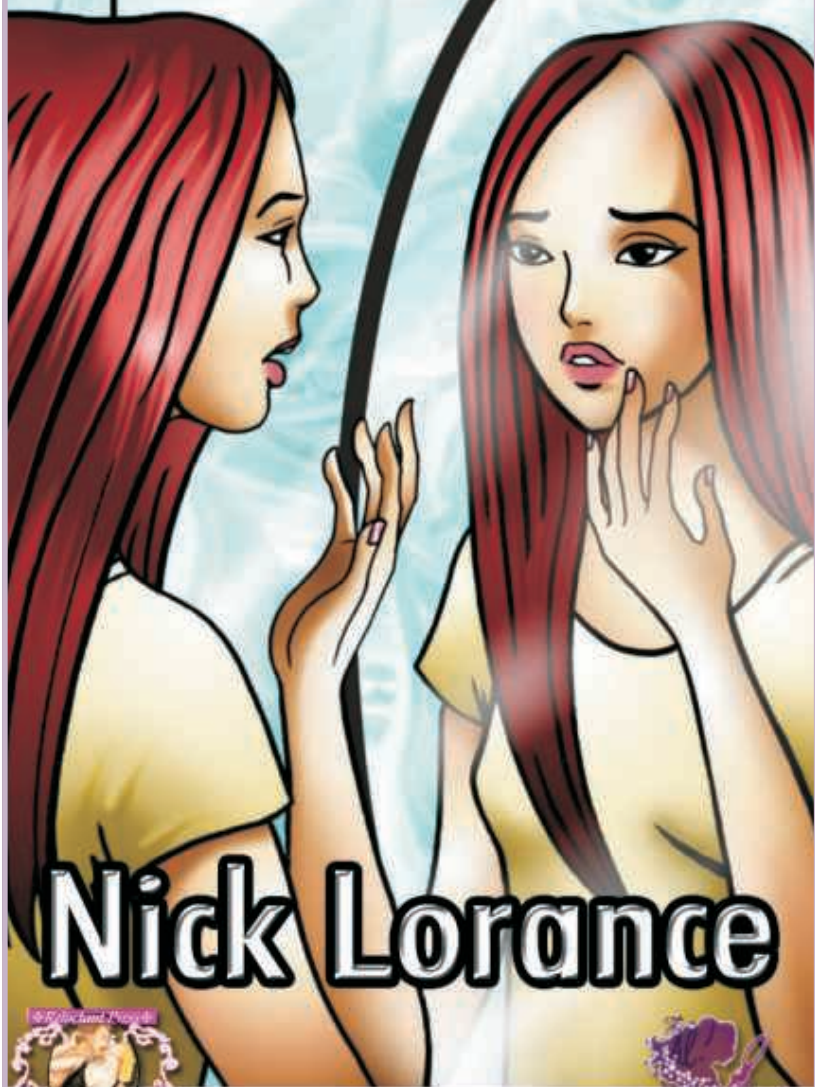


My Best Friend's Girl



Nick Lorance



A "New Woman" Novel



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My Best Friend's Girl

By Nick Lorange

I'm standing in front of the mirror, looking at myself. I still don't believe that is me. It sure isn't the Dan Foster I had seen in it up until about three weeks ago. So much has changed in such a short time that I am not sure where to begin.

No, I remember the Caterpillar talking to Alice in Wonderland. Start at the beginning, go through the middle, get to the end, then stop. So let's start at the beginning...

My early life

I won't bore you with it all. I was born in 1948, meaning I am now 65 years old. I am old enough to remember

President Eisenhower. But my present circumstances started much later. I was just some kid who spent his time after high school picking up spare cash by going down to a freight yard and helping to load and unload trucks, When it came time for me to serve my country, I joined the Air Force. My earlier life helped there.

You see, back then they had the draft. When you got out of high school, every boy had to worry that his number might come up. If you didn't have any skills that would keep you out of the infantry, or a college you were going to, you could end up freezing your ass off in Korea, or maybe in the new war in Vietnam. But the Air Force could use people who can load planes. If you were good enough to balance that load so the plane could carry the most, they kept you doing that. I was very good. So after Basic Training and Material Handling School, I was assigned as an assistant loadmaster, and stationed at Yokota MATS base outside of Tokyo.

For a kid during Vietnam, this was a dream assignment. You were close enough to Vietnam that any flights there automatically counted as combat with hazardous duty pay. You were far enough away that getting shot at was unlikely. Just a few miles away by bus and shuttle train were Tokyo and the Ginza. My dad had spent three years at the end of WWII as a garrison trooper stationed in Japan and when he got blitzed he'd reminisce about the place. To me as a child the Ginza was an adult amusement park, sort of like that new place, Disneyland.

Girls, shows, massage parlors where the girls would strip and walk on your back before doing a lot more. I wondered about it, imagining GIs in their neat uniforms boarding the trains. When they reached the Ginza, I pictured them jumping off nekkid to dive into a sea of willing women. I always wondered why he didn't bring back a girl, or L.O.F.M. as he called them. That means Little

Oriental Fuck Machine, compared to the L.B.F.M. of Subic Bay or Thailand, the little brown ones who were all the rage of the Navy.

He didn't because he'd already been engaged to Mom who was Pennsylvania Dutch, big as a Mack truck, with a wicked temper. She'd hear him talking or hear him teaching me what little Japanese he knew (mainly, "Hey sweetheart, care to polish my knob?") and come down like the wrath of the Old Gods; not JC and Jehovah, like the Norse Gods with bad attitudes. When he was drunk he'd fall back on his own father who was Scottish, so the arguments were in German (Her) and Gaelic (Him). That was why I could tell the recruiter truthfully I was conversant in two foreign languages, though most of what I knew was not for polite company.

So I went. I should mention that there were other things to do beyond dipping your wick and drinking yourself into a stupor. From Japan you could get to Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. You could take pictures of something beyond naked women, and I did a lot of that in those two years. I also picked up enough of the language that I could ask for something beyond eating, drinking, and fornicating.

But that ended for me in 1968 with the Tet Offensive.

Some smart little guy had found a way to slip a Russian made 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun in range of the glide path into position right before the offensive began. The first I knew about it was as the C130 Hercules I was assistant loadmaster on came in on final approach at Da Nang. I was checking the load before strapping in when I heard several thumping sounds like someone was running down the outside of the plane, hitting the skin with a hammer. Then I was on the deck. It felt like someone had smacked me in the back of the leg with a baseball bat.

I didn't feel pain beyond that first sharp jolt so I didn't know what had happened yet. I started to sit up and the first thing I noticed was blood spraying from my lower left leg. We'd had first aid training in Basic; I could tell it had to be bad, so I unzipped my flight suit far enough to pull off my web belt and wrapped it around my leg just below the knee. I put it there because I didn't have anything below that.

"Fos? Damn it, Foster, if you're fucking around back there..." I heard Sergeant Conners, the loadmaster, cursing as he unstrapped and came aft. He took one look, and whispered, "Shit." Then he was using the buckle of the belt to tighten it down hard enough that I grunted from the pain of that. I stared at my leg as I felt the wheels hit the ground. The next time I was conscious, I was in the hospital in San Francisco.

They told me I was lucky. The guy had been firing five round bursts and if he had waited less than a second, I would have gotten that first round through the gut. Picture pulling the innards out of a freshly-killed turkey for thanksgiving. But looking at what I had to deal with, I wasn't so sure.

Getting on with Life

I walked out of the VA hospital in the summer of '69 with a fake leg and a 50% pension. Fifty percent because that's what they award you for a lost leg or arm. It sounds good until you remember that a Loadmaster 2nd took home less than \$200 dollars back then so I got a little over \$100. Not enough to pay the bills on Civvie Street. I could have gone home but I didn't want to live with the folks and be an object of pity or scorn. Pity because I was a gimp, scorn because of how I came to be one. So I decided to stay in San Francisco when I got my discharge.

Public opinion was so polarized by Vietnam that you were either a super patriot or so against the war that anyone who came home was automatically a baby killer. The fact that 90% of us were drafted cut no ice; if you went, you were a closet homicidal maniac. If you really believed it was wrong, you went to jail. After about a year when people asked about the leg, I'd just tell them it was none of their fucking business. I got a job as first assistant, then lead dispatcher at a freight yard; I went through the rest of the time until the new century dawned sending shit from one place to another.

I also spent most of it alone. If I met a girl, the leg was going to come up. After all if she wants to dance, you have to explain why you don't. Or if she's feeling amorous, she was going to notice it when you stripped, unless she was blind or blind drunk. If she was one of those super patriot types I mentioned, she'd probably do you just because she felt it was her duty. If she was an anti-war type, she'd ask you how many babies you burned before some righteous little Charlie sent you home. By the 80s, most of them had forgotten the Nam, and you could lie about it. But I was an old man who just wanted to forget it all.

Let's face it; I was as social as a hermit crab.

In 2010 my military pension was around 1,000 dollars; thanks to thirty odd years working for freight lines, I had that pension as well. My company was moving into a new warehouse and the bosses asked me to retire. I took it well, at least on the outside. Sure I was just as tired as they were with it. Recent progress in prosthetics meant I had a leg that was a lot more mobile than my earlier one had been, but I still couldn't run or dance. I had fought a desperate rearguard action against applying for Social Security, especially when people pointed out I could have applied at thirty thanks to my disability.

But I was a stubborn cuss. Besides, if the leg needed repair, I still had a free pass at the VA hospital until I croaked, plus a burial in a graveyard of my choice. Dad had died in '91, followed a month later by Mom. My aunts, uncles and siblings joked at the funeral that Mom had followed him so closely because she hadn't won that last argument. While I would have been welcome back in Texas, I had nothing in common with the relatives; My younger brother was ten years younger than me; my siblings they scaled down to the youngest, Becky, who had been born when Reagan was in office.

So after Mom died, I never went back. My folks had left the house and land to the ones who stayed at home, I had gotten a few thousand bucks which I just stuck in the bank and forgot about, except for going in and moving the money into CDs so they wouldn't think I was dead. But after retirement, all I was doing was marking time until the Black Camel knelt at my door.

The Statue

I lived near Little Osaka, what the locals call Japantown or J-Town for short. It's a six-block area bordered by Sutter and Geary at the north and south respectively, Running from Webster on the west, ending at Laguna on the east. It's the oldest enclave of Japanese society in the U.S. I chose it because the rent was low enough that I could pay it and frankly, I still had a fondness for the people.

A lot of the last two generations are as American as apple pie, but the ones my age still have that serenity and patience you expect. About once a week I would stomp over to the area to hit the restaurants for a taste of my past. Within months I was a fixture; the new immigrants who got jobs as waiters and waitresses got a chance to

meet someone who didn't think 'American' meant we were automatically better than them.

One day about a month ago, I was headed there when I saw a garage sale just on the edge of the neighborhood. The kid behind the table was one of those sour little shits who is a member of the X Generation. They called them that because they have no real plans for life; after all the government gives you everything you need on both ends. And in the middle? You take what you can. There was the usual stuff you expect at any garage sale, but on the table he was at was a Netsuke. They're a sculpture art form traced back to the 17th century where the artist creates something beautiful and alive in anything from ivory to granite. There was a coal black hematite Kitsune that caught my eye, and he saw me looking at it.

"Like that, Pops?" He ticked me off just by opening his mouth. The only way to piss me off faster than calling me 'Pops' was by using the diminutive of my first name. The kitsune wasn't carved like a cameo, it had been carved as if from life, crouching like a kitten waiting to pounce on a mouse, or a dog waiting for you to throw a stick. It had nine tails which I knew was the highest rank of the fox spirits. I picked up the statue and looked at the bottom.

Ten bucks. He'd taken something older than the United States itself, worth a small fortune to a collector, and was asking ten bucks for it. Obviously he didn't have a clue about his own culture; selling a netsuke at a garage sale is like taking your Grandfather's mint condition Stutz Bearcat and asking a thousand bucks for it. Of course he couldn't have sold it to a legitimate collector any more than you could sell the Mona Lisa to one.

"I like the statue. I was just wondering what your parents would say about you selling it without permission."

He started screaming at me. Like I said, the last two generations of Japanese Americans are like our own homegrown kids, as just as ill-mannered. He would have kept screaming if someone hadn't stopped him.

A man about my age came up and shouted one word: 'Kyo.' It was probably the kid's name because he shut right up. Behind the man was one of those ancient women you sometimes glimpse over there in Asia. Women there seem to go through only four stages. First one is children where except for the clothes, you can't really tell them apart. Then suddenly around fifteen they go into this porcelain doll stage where suddenly they are women; you really can't tell their age until they reach about their forties. Then they turn into sweet little women who remind you of your mother, all smiles and hearty laughs. Then suddenly they transmute into wizened little apple dolls who are like the mountains themselves, ancient and mysterious.

The argument was getting hot and heavy as the old man picked up the cash box, tucking it under his arm. If I had been the average Gaijin — foreigner — it would have been less uncomfortable. But I could understand every word the old man was shouting and the kid was retorting with. Then the boy snatched up the Kitsune, raising his arm as if to dash it on the ground.

I moved without thinking, grabbing his wrist, and stopping him. The boy tried to punch me but the old man, his father, caught the other wrist. "I wish you'd just let me get on with my life and make money, you old faggot!" he screamed at me. I twisted his arm enough that he dropped the piece. I caught it in midair, then set it down gently.

"The first rule in life is to sell only what is yours, not what you can pick up," I replied in Japanese. They all looked at me surprised.

"Well, fuck you!" He pulled his wrist free, but his father took him to his knees with an arm bind.

"You have dishonored us by stealing from your Obaasan, and such language! No son of mine would act so shameless!"

"Then I'm not your son, asshole!" He pulled away from the old man's grip, grabbed his jacket and stormed down the street.

The man stared after him. The difference between someone raised there, as this man must have been, and the average Joe here, is the former are more polite. I knew he wanted to scream after the boy, and if he'd been like the boy, he would have. Instead he turned to me, his face slowly smoothing, then bowed deeply. "Sir, I must most humbly apologize. My son has acted shamefully."

"He has drunk too deeply of our culture," I replied, returning the bow. When I did, he bowed even deeper. "That is our shame and his. Not yours."

"You are far too kind," he replied, face burning with the shame of having to apologize.

"Let us not speak of it, sir. His words are like the wind, ever present with no news."

"No. There is one thing more." I looked at the grandmother, bowing to her. She picked up the statue, and held it out. "What he would sell, I would give."

"No. It is too much honor," I replied.

"What he did not understand was this was given to our family ten generations ago, on the promise that it would not be sold ever. It can only be given with a free heart and taken in the same manner lest the curse strike him who tries to sell it." She pressed it into my hand. "As was done then, in repayment of an insult, I do now. Please, it is yours." Her eyes begged me to accept. I did.

But to salve my own conscience, I bought every kitchen utensil they had for sale which I could use.

I know now that the events I am going to relate began then; with a chance meeting with that family, and the statue I took home.

The Wish

It started the next day. I had eaten dinner and gone on to the bar I hung out at sometimes. Remember the TV show Cheers and its theme song? Somewhere where everybody knows your name? I hung out at an Irish pub named Rhiannon. Good home-brewed Irish or Scots style beer. A Scotch selection including four I am sure never saw the taxman's stamp on either side of the Atlantic, and decent pub grub.

But most important, it had people who decide whether they like you or not over time rather than with a snap decision. That let you be you. If they don't like you, they still act polite but you get it soon enough and stop coming. But if they do, it's like being part of a big happy family.

I was sitting there with a pint of their best stout when Chris Miller walked in. He looked as if his last friend had died, though I knew that wasn't true. I was his friend and I hadn't been planted yet. I raised my glass and he waved and walked over, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Hey, Danny," he said.

I crooked my finger; when he bent over, I caught his collar and bounced his forehead off the table. He looked at me half-amused, half in pain, then fell into the chair beside me, laughing. "You old bastard."

"Never call me Danny," I warned him yet again. I raised my glass with my other hand open wide and Jane behind the bar nodded. He was still rubbing his head when the pitcher and another glass arrived. He poured a

glass and chugged it before pouring another. "What's you're malfunction this time?" I asked, pouring another for myself.

"The usual," he grumped.

"Women again?" I heard this an average of once a month. He'd meet some girl, they'd seem to hit it off, then he'd be here drinking my beer, crying on my shoulder. If I were the kind that minded paying for a pitcher occasionally, I would have thought he did it just for the free suds. But he didn't do it often enough for me to be that paranoid.

He nodded ruefully. I could understand part of his problem. He was in his mid-twenties, studying for a degree in history. Frankly I thought it was worthless unless you were going to teach in a private school or at the college level; the history they teach below that is baby food in comparison to what really happened. We got along because I had lived through almost three times as much history he had, and being there gives you a whole different outlook from reading the dry text.

We'd met in this very bar about three years earlier. He had just turned 21, studying American History at the local university, and had decided to celebrate by having his first beer. Unfortunately he'd brought a friend studying Middle Eastern History and they had gotten into a debate. I call it a debate, but it was actually a screaming argument. The problem is, to understand the Middle East, you have to have teachers who understand the region. That means most of the professors and guest lecturers are Arabs. If it were a peaceful region, it wouldn't have been that bad, but the average guest lecturer would have to get into the Jewish situation eventually. When they did, things got ugly.

The 'friend' had just spouted one of the usual lies; that the modern Jews were heir to the Nazi ideal. I replied with the truth, that the Jews fought so hard and took shit from no one because no one else had stood up for them against the Nazis. So instead of screaming at Chris, he started yelling at me. While he didn't notice, bets were flying.

He'd just been shot down by nothing but facts when he retorted, "Just because it's a fact doesn't mean it's the truth!"

I signaled for my second beer of the night. "By definition, a fact is something that actually exists, and truth is defined as something verifiable by facts. By that definition, you are full of shit."

That was when someone shouted, "Go Fos!"

"Fos?" The friend, who had been chugging two-to-one with Chris, looked toward the man who had shouted. "You must be Foster! The guy who got shot up during Vietnam!" He glared at me with a self-righteous air, laughing in scorn. "Well obviously you don't know dick about reality if you fought in the wrong war, Danny boy!"

"Do you have medical insurance?" I asked as I set the glass down, picking up the napkin from my fish and chips.

"You think you can take me, you old faggot?" He started to stand.

"Just checking." I caught him by the back of the head, and slammed his face down on the bar hard enough to break his nose. As he screamed, I stuck the napkin in his hand. Before it could get ugly, Ray the bouncer was there.

"He attacked me! You're all witnesses!" he screamed as Ray caught him by the scruff of the neck.

"Yeah," Eric the barman that night said. "We all heard you screaming like a harridan about your opinions, and when someone challenged them logically, you called him a faggot. Ray, show him the door."

The room quieted down after that. Chris was staring at the door, then turned those lambent green eyes on me. "Why did you do that?"

"No one calls him Danny!" the entire bar chorused. I glared around, but the winner of the bet (he'd bet I'd bounce him off the bar) sent over a pitcher with an apology. I split it with Chris, and we became friends.

"What is it about me?" he moaned. "Am I ugly or stupid?"

I looked at him, considering. I don't like guys that much, and that way not at all, but I considered him objectively. He was a little over six feet tall, well-muscled because he worked out, though it was a swimmer's build, not like a serious lifter. He had black shaggy hair that could use a cut, but I thought girls would like it. Under that was a face with square jaw and eyes that would have looked better on a cat than a human. He gave me a worried look.

"Kid, you clean up pretty well and when it comes to brains, you have them. But maybe you should have studied, oh, veterinary medicine instead. The problem is most people think history is a word in the dictionary, not something to actually study. Remember, those who do not learn from history..."

"Are doomed to repeat it," he finished the quote. "Hell, did you know most of the people in my class over at the U don't even know who George Santayana was?" he snorted, finishing his beer. He refilled both our glasses. "The best I could get out of them was that they thought

he'd started a rock band with his brother Carlos." We laughed together.

"Why veterinary medicine?"

I was nervous. "When I was a kid, I found a crow with a broken wing. I was always bringing strays home and this was another of them. I wrapped it in my coat and took it to Doctor Laine, the local vet. He built a wooden frame to support the wing and for three weeks I took care of the bird until it was able to fly. Then I let it go." I shrugged. "I wanted to be a vet back then. But I never got the chance."

Later I got home and my hand caressed that beautiful statue. I considered Chris and thought I wish I could find someone that makes him happy in every way.

That was when it began.

The first changes

One problem with trauma is the nightmares. I don't know how many times I relived those seconds in the first two decades or so. The worst was when I pictured the plane just hanging there in midair; as I ran frantically around the cargo deck the bullets would chase me like a sadistic cat. That dream almost always ended with me trapped in a corner as the bullets lazily cut closer and closer. Does a mouse in that situation feel relief when the claws finally rip it apart? Not long ago I read a book by Terry Prachett where he commented that if cats looked like anything but purring furry bundles, we'd suddenly see what little monsters they really are.

I was dreaming about waking up and thought, Oh, this one. I'll look for my fake leg, then spend the rest of the dream crawling and hopping around because I can't find it. I almost decided to just stay in bed in the dream but my bladder began to complain. Fine. I rolled, swing-

ing my legs over the side. Yup, no leg down there. Then I pushed myself up to my feet... My feet? I looked down and almost collapsed in shock. I was standing on two real legs.

Usually this would segue into my being aboard the plane again but this time I was in my apartment, standing by my own bed. I could even see the kitsune sitting on the table... Wait. I had put the kitsune on top of the combination entertainment center dresser, a good six feet off the ground, not on the table. I walked across to it and paused as I started to pick it up. One of the tails was twitching as if it was trying to wag. I reached out, my finger touched the tail, and it flicked away like a cat's will if you touch it. Then it flicked back, brushing my finger, then away again.

I went back to sit on the bed and looked down at my feet. The first thing I noticed was that the left leg didn't look right. It looked smaller, more slender than the right one, as if some kid's leg had been grafted on. I stood and got dressed. Fine, if I had a real leg for a while in a dream, I'd make the most of it. I went walking, feeling the ground beneath my new leg, riding the streetcars through the night.

I reached the Tenderloin and heard something strange from an alley. Since it was a dream, I wasn't worried, so I looked in. About halfway down it, I saw a figure on all fours and heard gasps of pain. Then the figure looked up. It was Kyo, the kid from the garage sale. He was clutching his heaving chest and his face was a study in mortal terror. Then he seemed to recognize me. He held the hand not clutched to his chest out in a plea for help. Something leaped over me before I could move and I recoiled in shock.

It landed beyond him, and turned. It was a kitsune exactly like the statue, but it was the Kitsune from Hell. Think of the Thanator from Avatar, the predator that al-

most kills the main character and later allows Natiri to bond with it to attack the villain, except with four legs instead of six, and as big as a compact car. It turned and looked at me for a moment through silver eyes, then ignored me as it stalked toward the boy. He was cowering down, trying to make himself smaller. It leaned down and picked him up in its mouth with a curiously gentle grip, more like a cat or dog picking up a young animal to carry it to safety.

“Help me,” he whispered. Then the monster leaped up to the rooftop and was gone.

I came awake with a start. Wow, I didn’t know what I had eaten or drunk the night before that was different, but if I found out, I wasn’t sure whether I would try it again or avoid it like the plague. That was some wicked ass dream. I reached over and touched the snooze button on my electronic clock, which also lighted the display. It was an hour before I usually got up but that didn’t bother me. I usually slept only about six hours anyway. I reached past it, turned on the lamp, then reached down to pick up my leg.

It wasn’t there.

If you’re missing a leg, you always put your prosthetic in reach when you take it off. It’s a pain in the ass to hop around like some kid playing hopscotch in the morning. I found that out the first time I got drunk and took it off to massage the stump, then forgot I had. Grumbling, I leaned out of the nice warm bed and began fumbling around under the edge of the bed, thinking I had kicked it underneath. I’d done that a time or two at first. But this time it wasn’t there.

I looked down and saw two feet under the sheet. Great, I’d forgotten to take it off. I had done that at the start too and let me tell you, it’s no picnic in the mornings.

The stump would move around in the socket all night; by morning when I tried to stand, it was like the socket had razors in it. I groaned at the idea, kicked my feet out over the floor, and set them on the ground.

Wait. No pain. Maybe I was lucky this time. Wait, Two feet were on the floor. No. I must be still dreaming. Just waking up in a dream after waking up in another dream. It happens sometimes. I reached across to pinch my right arm and winced. Shit, that hurt! Then I leaned down and pinched my right calf. Ow. I reached down and pinched the replacement leg. It hurt too.

Great, I was still dreaming. I got up anyway and started toward the kitchen when suddenly I realized I was still limping as I had for over forty years. I had a new leg in the dream, but was acting as if I didn't. I shrugged mentally. My mind had realized that the new leg was fake this time, so I had added my limp back. I made my usual breakfast, the type people call a lumberjack breakfast. My new doctor down at the VA hospital was on a health kick and had been trying to get me to go vegan for the last few years.

I smoked, I drank, I ate whatever I damn well pleased, and had for longer than he had been alive. Did I really want to live longer by eating food I hated? So I had a breakfast so heavy in starch and fat that I could almost feel my arteries hardening with every bite, and enjoyed every mouthful.

I had just finished washing up after limping back to the bed when the alarm went off and was getting dressed when the phone rang. It was one of those automated reminders that you have an appointment at such and such a time that doctors started using in the last decade. I always wanted to sarcastically answer the voice, but that was just silly. I hung up and went to the closet. Like in my dream, the new leg was smaller but when I pulled out my sneak-

ers, I paused, holding them side by side. The left sneaker was also smaller, around a size five beside the size eight of the right one.

Right. Whatever it was, I was definitely **not going to have it again.**

I left, stumping down the street to the bus stop. People I knew in passing greeted me, but I was in a surly mood, so all they got was silence. I hopped on, took a seat, and watched the city go by. It was a beautiful morning; if had been real, I would have been enjoying it more. I got off finally outside the VA and went in to see the doctor.

I had outlived or outlasted nine doctors in my time. One I knew had died, the others had been promoted or re-assigned; the new one was so fresh out of medical school he practically squeaked. I came down once a year to have the prosthesis checked; when you lose a leg, the muscles between the lost part and the rest atrophy, and you have to have it resized occasionally.

When he came in, he talked about my weight issue. I weighed in at just under 180 pounds, and he was worried, even though it was mainly because I was stocky rather than fat. He had me stand on the scale, one of those standing scales they use, and began adjusting it. I stared at the weight as he made a note, because it couldn't be right. I weighed 145 at the moment.

"Well, you lost a couple of pounds, so that's good," he commented, making a note. "But I'd still like to see you lose a few more."

"A few? Jesus Christ, doc, you think 35 pounds are a few?" I asked sarcastically. He gave me a look as if he expected me to start spitting pea green soup like the kid from the Exorcist.

He looked at the chart instead. "180? Last month you weighed 150."

I grabbed the chart, flipping it open. There on the page was a chart. Four months earlier, 180; last month, 150. New weight, 145.



"Must be the new leg." I commented. I was used to that because back when I got my first one, it had been wood covered with plastic to look real, and was heavy as hell. The more modern ones were of space age materials, and lighter, but mine still weighed almost twice what a real leg would weigh.

"Leg? What about the leg?"

"The artificial one," I replied as if he were slow.

"You have a prosthesis?" He took back the folder and flipped through the chart, looking even more confused. "I see no mention of one." He handed me the chart again before I could snatch it back. I flipped back through it with growing alarm. According to it, I had first come to the hospital when I retired, not in 1969. Since I was a vet, the VA had allowed me to use their facilities instead of Medicare. I had originally come in (according to this chart) for an annual check up and until the last year, that was all the time I had spent there. This last year, however, I had been scheduled monthly for my weight issues.

"But the leg... I lost it in Vietnam! Why are they paying my disability if I have two?"

His gaze sharpened. "Let me see it, please." I sat on the examination table, pulled up my pant leg, and he sat on the stool, examining it carefully. "I don't see anything wrong with it, Mr. Foster." I pulled up the other pant leg, and he looked at them side by side. Then he looked at me, more worried than confused. "I don't see any difference."

"Fine. Either you're as blind as a bat, or I am out of my tiny little mind."

"Well sometimes old people remember things differently."

An old friend once said that English is the only language where you can take two positives and make a negative. He was correct. "Yeah, right." I pulled down the legs of my pants. "I just spent forty-five years of my life 'believing' I had a wooden leg." I hopped down. "Explain why I limp then." He watched me walk back and forth, but shook his head. Obviously he didn't see me limping either. He handed me the usual two scrips for meds, and I got out of there before he could have me committed.

I went through my normal routine for a Wednesday. To the market, back home, out to dinner, then to the bar for a quick drink. It was when I was in the back aisle at the meat counter where I figured out what had happened. The fake leg weighed about 20 pounds, but I wasn't wearing it. So my weight should be around 160. If I had grown a new one, that flesh and bone had to come from somewhere. But the leg was smaller down there, as if a teenager's leg had been grafted on. That would bring my weight down to about 150?

But that didn't explain where the other five pounds had disappeared to.

I walked past where the kid's family lived. The father, who had introduced himself as Koshiro Tamaki saw me and gave me a small polite bow, which I returned. His mother, Aoi, also bowed to me. After that first meeting we had become acquaintances, and the gift of Manju I had given them that day had been gravely accepted. We were on the edges of being friends, and since I liked them both, I felt good about it.

"How is Kyo?" I asked. They both looked sour.

"He has not come home since that disgraceful display." Koshiro replied.

"I am sorry I brought up such a sad subject." I bowed deeply.

"It was not your fault, Daniel-san." He returned the bow just as deeply. "I have heard he is staying with his friends." The way he said the last word, I knew what kind of 'friends' he meant.

"Perhaps he will learn better."

"If twenty years of life has not taught him, can days?"

"I do not know."

"I thank you for your concern for him."

I went on with my day, had my drink and went home. But when I woke up the next morning, the leg was still there.

Rearguard action

I had picked up a scale at the store, and when I got up I weighed 140. I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I was not going to lose weight like a good little patient. I made my usual breakfast; a quarter-pound ham steak, four rashers of bacon, four sausage links, six slices of toast, and about a half-pound of hash browns.

The problem was, I couldn't finish it. Hell, I'd eaten that much every morning for my entire life, and seeing three slices of toast and half of the meat still sitting on the plate when I felt stuffed worried me. Sudden weight loss and loss of appetite are symptoms of some pretty serious things, though for the life of me, I didn't know what. I just needed some exercise. So I went walking. I must have walked eight miles before lunch. I got home, pulled out the leftovers from breakfast, and wolfed them down, but I couldn't seem to think of what to eat beyond that. Nothing appealed.

I've had dreams before that seemed to last hours, even days, though you could almost feel the dream fast-forwarding past the boring stuff. I had never had a dream

that felt real every second. But too much was happening that didn't make sense for it to be anything but a dream.

Human beings do not grow back lost limbs. Yet even if it didn't match my own leg, I seemed to have done just that. Medical files over forty years old do not rewrite themselves, excising all of that past, though since files are just paper someone could have removed the older ones, but why? Then there was the fact that while I met the same people every day **none of them noticed these changes.**

As Tuesday rolled around, I had lost more weight. I was down to 120. My appetite had fallen off and I had started making smaller meals, though I still ate until I felt stuffed. But even eating the richest food I could think of, the weight just dropped off. I didn't feel bad, in fact I felt good, better than I had before I came back from the war.

Exactly a week after it began, I found myself dreaming again. Among my shoes in the dream were a pair of high-heeled boots. I looked at them, wondering when I might have bought them, since only a newbie with a fake leg would wear knee-high boots, and heels were right out. After all, the first thing you do when you buy shoes is make sure they fit the artificial leg; you're going to have to put them on and leave them there all day. If they don't fit, the one on your prosthesis will rub until you have a fine pile of plastic dust in the shoe.

I knew it was a dream, but I was sure it was all a dream before the leg. But if it was a dream, it was as real as life. I still had to eat and excrete, and walking around on two legs had made the limp vanish. I just assumed the dream was continuing, so I sat on the edge of the bed in my pants, and pulled the boots on. They were a soft suede leather and the heels were a little higher than cowboy boots. They fit perfectly.

I was just finishing dressing when something made me look at my apartment door. Something was outside; my heart leapt in terror as I found myself walking over to it. I pulled it open, then stepped through.

It was the same alley I had seen in the first dream. Kyo was curled up as he had been before, and as he looked up and saw me, he made the same 'help me' gesture. Then a pair of silver eyes opened beyond him. They were almost eight feet off the ground and as I stared at them, a mouth with huge teeth gaped in a yawn. Then as if forming from the shadows themselves, the Kitsune padded forward.

Kyo saw where I was looking, and spun around. He gave a scream of terror, his hands raised in supplication. The Kitsune yawned again but this time a green mist shot from its mouth, enveloping Kyo. He screamed again in mortal terror, then his clothes exploded away from his body. They swirled in the air like a flock of birds, still covered in the mist, then began to change.

First from the cloud came a pair of girl's panties. They floated toward the naked boy; he scooted backwards, but from the cloud now came a pair of opera-length gloves. They waved, as if they were just hanging on a clothes line. But then the hands flexed and shot forward like twin snakes. The hands closed around his ankles, lifting his feet into the air, and the panties slid over his feet. Once they had reached the ankles, the gloves released him.

He fought to keep them away as the panties slid up his legs. Now a pair of stockings floated from the mist and began to slide up his legs. He tried to fight them off, but it was as if they had a life of their own and the patience of a Venus Flytrap. If he held the panties away, the stockings would slide below his hands and inch up the legs. If he tried to stop the stockings, the panties would gain a couple of inches. And more was coming from the mist.