

IN FINERY

By Sofronia Anne Strong



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A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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IN FINERY

By **Sofronia Anne Strong**

“It's sort of a bloom on a woman. If you have it, you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't much matter what else you have.”

J.M. Barrie: *What Every Woman Knows*

CHAPTER ONE: AUNT MARJORIE'S LITTLE GIRL

There is an irony in the fact that the males of the Irish branch of my family breed “true to the bone”, as it is said. Without exception, each seems to have mocked his sex by growing up slight and delicate in stature, fair complexioned and blond, with long-lash adorned, wide, blue eyes set in a perfectly oval face. These beautiful men, for such is the simple fact of my heritage, have historically tended to seek out large boned, strong willed women to wife. Perhaps, these choices were based on the hope that the apparent strength of such women might alter or somehow enhance the bloodline; but this “improvement” never came to pass. If anything, these strong women only dominated the lives of my male progenitors, in both physical strength and in will power.

There was another peculiarity in my family: Beautiful men usually begin as beautiful boys. And, it was not uncommon for these strong willed women to amuse themselves by putting their pretty sons in petticoats. Now, I have been unable to determine if crossdressing the sons in our family predates the Civil War, but, I shouldn't be surprised to learn that some of my male forbearers were raised as proper Colonial misses.

In actual fact, I know that my great grandmother kept her sons, my grandfather, who we called Dad-Frank, and his older brother, Willard, out of the army in the last years of the Civil War, by disguising them as her daughters, and moving from Boston to Chicago. Two years after the war, when Willard was twenty one and Dad-Frank nearing twenty, she moved the family to the state of Iowa, where the youths resumed their normal male lives. There is no evidence to support my suspicion that five years in petticoats left them both addicted to feminine finery, but I firmly believe such to be the case. In support of this, I refer you to several tin-type photographs in our family albums taken some four years after the war: in one, you will see my formidable great-grandmother posed on a straight-backed chair, her slender and delicate featured little husband standing at her left and her lovely “daughters”, dressed in their most festive finery, at her right. Clearly the efforts of the photographer in reversing the normal manner of posing failed to compensate for the topsy-turvy stature of the husband and wife. It is clear the matriarch in this family is far and away the most physically impos-

ing of the group. The young “women” and their father all appear to be very much the same stature and the three might almost be taken for sisters, if one could somehow imagine the father in what his wife termed “finery” as well.

Like her mother-in-law, Gram (Dad-Frank's wife and my father's mother) also referred to the habiliments of a lady as finery. By this, of course, she meant the elegant, feminine attire which distinguished a lady of that time from a mere woman. In grandmother's time such distinctions were not yet thought pejorative. Naturally, her views were shaped before the age of feminism, a viewpoint Gram would have found absurd. In her view a lady was distinguishable by her finery and finery was something which a lady understood by nature of being a lady.

Gram believed that an appreciation of finery was inherent, arising from good breeding. She made no distinction between a person's genetic make-up and their enculturation. To her, good breeding always showed and one could not be brought to, or trained for, an appreciation of finery. One was either well-bred or one was not and only if one was well bred, would one understand and appreciate finery. Refinement of behavior, appearance and deportment were the hallmarks of good breeding and one measure of these qualities was a person's finery.

The only problem with Gram's philosophy on these points was that she didn't acknowledge a difference between “appropriate” finery for boys and girls prior to puberty. Until the distinguishing marks of sex emerged in adolescence, children were all one gender to her.

She kept my father in finery, feminine finery that is, until he was thirteen. At that age, he was subjected to a routine physical examination by school officials who were astounded to discover that he was male!

Thereafter, Gram distinguished between feminine finery and haberdashery, at least insofar as school attendance was concerned. Judging by the photographs in our family album, I suspect that my father would have preferred skirts, to the awful Little Lord Fauntleroy outfits in which he was sent off to school in the name of finery. At home he continued to be his mother's little lady much of the time until he left home for college. He never admitted it to me, but I eventually discovered that he remained a transvestite all of his life.

Gram was a suffragette, a leader of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the state of Iowa and always worked as a legal secretary for grandfather. She had earned a bachelor's degree from Grinnell College (one of the first women to do so), and had taught school prior to her marriage. By today's standards I suppose she would be considered at best, emancipated, a feminist; at worst, a pervert or a child abuser. But I am certain Gram didn't see herself that way. She was simply a strong-willed woman who didn't let mores or conventions get in her way and who didn't perceive gender distinctions as being important.

Gram, you see, was merely carrying on a family tradition when she kept my father in feminine finery until he was nearly grown. I am not certain whether she took the idea from her mother-in-law or hit upon it herself, but the question is probably moot. What matters is that I am of, at least, the third generation of men in my family to go

about in finery. Gram was right, breeding tells . . . and runs true to form, as any eugenist will tell you.

* * * * *

I am told, although I don't remember it, that I spent my preschool years in delicate finery, thanks to my Aunt Marjorie. She was wonderfully good to me, and I owe her a great deal. It was she who convinced her husband Carl to allow her to take father and me in after my mother died in childbirth. It was she who was my "mother" from my infancy until Doris entered my life. Most importantly, it was she who raised me as her little girl.

In her defense, I admit I did cooperate and the evidence of that is also in our family album where there are lovely pictures of a darling child with long, white-blonde, cork-screw curls. In the earliest photos the child is dressed in lacy baby gowns, followed by photos of the same child in adorable toddler skirts and preschool dresses. In each photograph, the child is held in Aunt Marjorie's lap, or is playing with a favorite dolly, tea set or other preschool girl's delight.

I do remember my snow-white curls weighing on my shoulders and the great trauma brought on by my first haircut. Aunt Marjorie wept bitter tears as the locks fell to the barber shop floor. I am convinced my lifelong aversion to the ministrations of the barber stems from the memory of how miserable and saddened she seemed to see my tresses shorn.

And what about Gram? I don't think she ever reconciled to Marjorie leaving home, though she herself had selected Marjorie's husband: the compliant, passive, Carl, who became my father's business partner. I now believe that she so missed Marjorie, that she tried to re-create, through me, the happier days of Marjorie's childhood. Even after Marjorie's wedding, she maintained her bedroom as it had been when she was a girl.

Gram would take me into that room and tell me what a beautiful girl Marjorie was. Then she would lay out one of Marjorie's lovely dresses and make a game of dressing me up. When, at last, she had me in an ensemble of Marjorie's lace and linen finery, she would hold me on her lap, smother me with kisses and tell me tales of Marjorie's girlhood and of how many beaux she had as a young woman.

When I was fully arrayed in finery, she would lead me to the glider on the front porch and there we would swing gently, glasses of lemonade in hand, and listen to the romantic music of Victor Herbert on the Victrola.

I had mixed feelings about those halcyon days. Gram was at her softest and most affectionate on these dress-up occasions. It was clear that she missed Marjorie very much and it seemed harmless enough to play at her masquerade because it pleased her so. I can't say I enjoyed being arrayed in petticoats and long dresses of white lawn and wearing a huge, beribboned picture hat, but I did enjoy Gram fussing over me and praising my good looks.

"Gentility can't be imitated," she would say. "Good breeding shines through. You are descended from the Stout and the Strong. Your fine features, fair complexion and refined demeanor all show it. You make a lovely girl, just as your father did. I hope you

don't mind indulging your sentimental old Gram in this." I didn't really mind all that much . . . In fact, it made me happy to please her so.

When I was almost six, after I returned from a summer of spending those lazy days in my aunt's cast-off finery, Marjorie caught me wearing her slip. I thought she was busy in the kitchen and I had slipped it over my head just to feel the cool, silky texture of the satin and lace. I was rubbing my tummy with it and squirming with pleasure when Marjorie came into the bedroom. I was terribly embarrassed, quite ashamed of myself, and I expected to feel the hair brush on my backside very shortly. Marjorie, however, merely sat on the bed and smiled at me tenderly. She hoisted me onto her lap and hugged me close to her bosom, engulfing me in the glistening lacy fabric of the slip.

"Doesn't that feel good?" she cooed. I nodded, still certain I was in great trouble. "Gram says you look so nice in finery . . . that you were quite precious and darling in ruffles and lace this summer. Did you like wearing my finery dear?"

I snuggled against her and sheepishly nodded my assent. It was not strictly true that I had liked wearing her old dresses, but I didn't want to say anything that might displease her.

"My slip is too big for you and you're fairly awash in it. I think we had better find one your own size, don't you?" Saying this she pulled her slip off over my head and hugged me again.

"You really have been naughty, you know; wearing my lingerie without permission. Now you must make it up to me. The Wisters are having a birthday party for Jack, this afternoon: you will attend as a girl and you will wear your very own slip and dress. We'll call you Cynthia and tell everyone you are my niece."

"Now, I am sure that Jack will not recognize you, since he has not seen you since last spring when the two of you had that terrible scuffle in the street, but you will have to be on your most girlish behavior, or he might expose you. As to his parents; well, they haven't seen you for almost a year, so I'm certain they will not realize who you are. So you see, it will be our secret. Won't that be fun? Do you think you'll like that?"

I was certain that the answer to both questions was NO, but Marjorie seemed so delighted with the idea that I hadn't the heart to refuse. Besides, I was concerned that she would tell father I had worn her slip and ought to be punished for it. Appearing as a girl at the birthday party of the bully I had managed to thrash in what I regarded as the battle of the century, while unappealing, seemed likely to be the lesser punishment.

She made a great ritual of my bath; washing me all over with the sponge and laughing and giggling over me. Her good mood persisted as she arrayed me in a dainty slip of silky satin and a chiffon party dress with an underskirt of yellow taffeta. The overdress of yellow chiffon, had puff sleeves and embroidered butterflies on the skirt. I particularly recall the chiffon bodice of the dress because I felt such embarrassment at the realization that the lacy top of the slip showed clearly through the fabric. She finished the ensemble with a pair of knee high, white silk hose and white, patent-leather maryjanes. Another aspect of that experience that may have helped to brand it on my memory is that for the first time, Marjorie used make-up on my childish features. The

faintest touch of blue eyeshadow and mascara were applied, a touch of blusher on my cheeks and a carefully blotted application of pink lipstick brought out the girlishness of my familial heritage. To complete the illusion, a voluminous wig of cascading blonde curls topped with a yellow bow was firmly pinned into my hair. She fussed with the skirts and the tresses and displayed her approval of the new girl effusively.

“When you are my pretty girl,” she said, “I expect you to behave as a perfect little lady and not as a ruffian.” But such was not difficult; It's hard to be a renegade while immersed in petticoats, lace and ribbons. Clearly, I found it easier to be demure than aggressive, hidden beneath all those curls.

I, or rather Cynthia, got along well at the party, especially considering that while the boys were allowed to play with Jack's most fascinating gifts, a Lionell train and his Gilbert Erector set, I was shunted off with the girls to admire his new baby sister and put up with all the little-girl prattle about how sweet and pretty she was. Because I was the only girl at



the party who had not brought a doll, Jack's mother filled that gap by putting me in charge of the baby in her pram when we all went to Momsen's Ice Cream Parlor for treats. Besides being unable to skip and run about as the other boys did along the way, I had to put up with occasional taunts from some of them about being a “dumb girl” and good only for taking care of babies. Natalie who had befriended me from the first walked by my side and hissed at me to ignore them.

“They are just smelly, bad boys who are jealous because they can't be mommies like we will someday be.” She announced in haughty tones. I couldn't tell her that I was pretty sure they weren't jealous because I was a boy too and I knew I didn't want to be a mommy. In fact, I wasn't very happy about having to play at being a mommy

instead of running and shouting and being generally obstreperous. I was pretty certain she wouldn't understand.

The high, or perhaps the low point of the party came when Jack's mother decided he should reward me with a kiss for the coloring book and crayons I had given him. The chaos that resulted when I stoutly refused the compliment and Jack practically wrestled me to the floor nearly ruined the party. He was taken to the next room and, I am sure, roundly scolded, while I was solicitously fussed over by the girls and the neighbor-mother who was helping Mrs. Wister manage the children. I remember reflecting as I walked home that even in skirts, or perhaps because of them, I had bested the Bully of Walnut Street once again . . . and on his home turf. Perhaps there was a value to being Cynthia that I had not previously perceived.

I had hoped to get out of the finery before Dad came home that evening, but Marjorie wanted him to see me and my yellow chiffon butterflies, probably because it meant she could explain why I had gone to the party in such a delicate condition.

Dad smiled at me indulgently and lectured me on respecting other people's property, but nothing was said about my desire to feel the cool touch of satin against my skin . . . which is what really had motivated my misdeed. From this I concluded that cross dressing was permitted, but that I must wear my own finery.

"In fact," Dad said, "If you want to wear lingerie, you should tell Marjorie and she will arrange to buy some of your own." Years later I realized that while he was speaking to me, he was undoubtedly wearing lingerie beneath his three piece suit of English worsted.

They were so sweet about it that at bedtime, I almost regretted having to take off the yellow chiffon and climb into my Dr. Dentons. I told Marjorie as much when she tucked me in and she said she would buy me a pretty nighty as soon as she could. I fell asleep regretting that I had said anything, but at the same time the idea of wearing a nighty to bed had a certain thrill to it.

On the day after the birthday party, Marjorie arrayed me in a wonderfully frilly and delicate blue taffeta frock from her childhood, fit me out in matching blue and white accessories, rearranged my hair in the elaborate curls of the day before and took me to Swanson's for their annual Fall Review of Children's Fashions. There was a judging of children's costumes and my World War I vintage costume won a portrait sitting, tinted prints of which sat prominently on the mantle over the living room fireplace and in a place of honor on Gram's bureau.

When we left the streetcar on the way home, Marjorie detoured me to Momsen's for a chocolate ice cream-soda and we giggled at each other in the back booth as we celebrated the success of my masquerade.

"You make such a precious girl," she said as we sipped our ice cream sodas. "Do you mind being my little girl once in a while?"

I assured her that I really didn't mind, all the while keeping my mental fingers crossed; for you see, I never considered that Marjorie disliked Bobby so much as she needed Cynthia. I know I certainly needed Marjorie desperately. How would Dad and I have been able to live without her? I had no other mother.

We finished the treat and, hand in hand, walked the two blocks back to the house. At that moment, I honestly didn't care if any of my pals saw me in my finery. I was having too much fun being Cynthia for my aunt. It was then that I first realized that the best way for me to be a good boy was to be a very, very good, little girl.

Marjorie would often say that boys were hard to raise and that she always wished she could have had a girl. She came close. She gave birth to a stillborn daughter just three months before I came along. Her preference for raising girls was as close as any member of the family ever came to actually saying that Cynthia was more welcome in the house than Bobby. I couldn't really seem to discover just who I was supposed to be in order to satisfy them. Something in me knew that I was all boy, all snips and snails, but I also knew that if I wanted to survive and be happy, I had best be prepared to be all sugar and spice and everything nice and to be so, on demand.

I was, I told myself, doing it for Marjorie and for Dad. It made them feel good and that made me feel good; even if deep down, being Cynthia somehow made me feel less than I was; demeaned in some way. On the few occasions that I refused to become Cynthia, it made me feel guilty and ungrateful and those feelings were the stronger ones. Being Cynthia made me feel uneasy, but displeasing the adults felt really awful, so I took the easier course . . . and became Cynthia on demand.

You should not come to the conclusion that my concerns for pleasing the adults had anything to do with feeling abused at having to be a girl so often. On the contrary, all concerned seemed most pleasant and kind when I was Cynthia, especially Marjorie. Breaches of discipline as Bobby were treated fairly but sternly. My failures as Cynthia were regarded as minor misunderstandings and were corrected privately. Marjorie would hold any criticism until we were alone and then discuss my errors sweetly and with no rancor.

During meals, when I was Cynthia, I sat on my usual piano stool with my skirts and petticoats arrayed in a circle around me, and remained quiet. You see, Gram subscribed to the school that children should be seen and not heard and this rule was especially enforced at table. My cousin James, who was three years older than I, also observed the silent child rule. James was perfect: a genius with a perfect school record, a pianist of accomplishment and never in need of correcting. Marjorie seemed content to let James be a boy, perhaps because he worked so very hard at being the perfect child.

For me to be perfect, I had to be Cynthia.

CHAPTER TWO: DREADFUL DORIS

In the spring of 1941 Dad-Frank died. Gram closed up the house in Iowa and, without so much as a by your leave, moved in with Carl, James and her daughter, taking charge of that family overnight. Wherever Gram was, there was no question about who was in charge.

In August of that same year, Dad married again. No longer Marjorie's lost daughter, I became Doris's wayward stepson. Doris was a middle aged, school teacher, steeped in all the latest scientific theories for dealing with small children. She never had children of her own, but she was a teacher and therefore able to horse about a couple of generations of other people's children.

Within moments of moving in, she announced that I was spoiled and that it was her responsibility to rescue me from the ruination visited upon me by Marjorie. I was pleased to be free of feminine finery, but confused and frightened by Doris's pronouncements that Marjorie had ruined me. She actually said that if left with Marjorie, I would have become a princess on a satin pillow; spoiled and indulged beyond redemption. I didn't understand such rhetoric, but it frightened me.

I didn't miss my tresses and dresses, but I did miss the love and affection Marjorie always gave. For Marjorie to put me in finery may have been bizarre, but at least she loved me. Doris, I discovered, didn't love me at all. In fact, she didn't love anyone. It would take me forty years to realize that Dad married her because he absolutely needed a dominant woman. Unhappily, I became the tool, the lever for her domination. When she wanted to get at him emotionally, she would punish me, even if she had to make up the reason. Such did not enhance my desire to cooperate with her.

Not much happened during the first year that Doris was with us. Briefly, I tried to please her, for I was too young to know that nothing would please Doris. Things first came to a head one July Saturday in '42 when Doris's step-niece Betty, a beautician, had dropped by for a visit.

For several days Doris and I had been engaged in a battle of wills about the garbage. Simply put, Doris wanted me to take it out as a matter of routine; I wanted her to ask me to do it each time it was needed. On that unhappy morning, I bugged-out without doing my chores at all. I was across the alley playing war in the empty lot when Doris came after me with blood in her eye; my blood. She hauled me home by one ear.

By the time we were in the kitchen I knew I was in deep trouble. Doris was spewing her litany of convictions as to my reprehensible shortcomings. When she had reduced me to tears, she parked me in a chair and turned Betty loose on me. Now, Betty usually came to the house on Saturdays to do Doris's hair and nails. On that Saturday, she did mine instead. First she rolled my longish hair in curlers and gave me a primitive home-permanent wave. While the wave took its set, she manicured my nails into delicate pink claws. Doris then tied a large silk scarf around my neck and wrote Aunt Marjorie a note, which she put in a little purse she handed to me, walked me to the streetcar line and put me on a car for the other end of the city.

An hour and a half later I stood before Marjorie's door, tears in my eyes and hideously confused and frightened. The note said that Marjorie had ruined me; that I was an incorrigibly bad boy and that I would better off as a girl. It said Marjorie could just keep me and turn me into a girl to her heart's content. Frankly, I was relieved at this turn of fate. Life with Marjorie was sometimes a trial, but life with Doris had become a torment.

The incident produced a great ruckus; Doris refused to have me back; Marjorie was compromised by my presence in her house and Dad wanted me back home. After I had spent a week at Marjorie's, a negotiated settlement was reached. I returned after promising never to displease Doris again. Doris, for her part, agreed not to throw me out again so long as I was obedient and respectful. She also extracted a commitment from Marjorie and Gram to not meddle in our family affairs. It was complicated and, like most such arrangements, was doomed to failure because it satisfied no one. It only seemed tenable.

I spent the rest of the summer growing out the permanent wave. Defying Doris and getting by with it became my main motivation. Straightening me out became Doris's chief concern. The war was on; I, defying Doris at every turn; Doris, clamping down on me at every act. Gram and Marjorie worked behind the scenes fomenting trouble to get rid of Doris. They thought Dad was the one caught in the middle of this conflict, but he only wanted peace, and was willing to let me earn it for him. A diplomat of convenience, he conceded to all but me. Thus, it was I who was caught in the middle. I had become the pawn in their inter-generational chess game.

Doris's opening gambit was strong. She took me to the Nifty Uniform Shoppe, an establishment operated by yet another of her countless relatives, where she supervised my fitting for an ensemble of mostly black silk, maid's uniforms, white aprons and lace caps. We rode home on the streetcar with my new uniforms in boxes on my lap. This woman, who in my view was fast becoming the epitome of the "wicked-step-mother" announced she was fed-up with my refusal to do my household chores and that I would be a maid until I demonstrated that I understood the life of a common person who had to work for a living. She explained to father that after all the years Marjorie had kept me in finery, the only way I knew to be good, was to play the girl. She, however, was not about to pander to any spoiled princess. Marjorie, she insisted had ruined me by giving me ideas above my station and she, Doris, was going to give me an awareness of the value of serving others instead of thinking only of myself.

I didn't understand any of this. Marjorie made me feel good, at least some of the time. Doris, never! Doris never hugged me, or held me, or soothed me when I was sad. She didn't even praise me when I did more than I was supposed to do. She only grew more angry at me for doing the right thing. The most confusing aspect of all was that she said she hated Cynthia but was now demanding that I become Cynthia again . . . and she was determined to be hateful about that!

I spent many days after school and most of each weekend in uniform. I scrubbed, polished, laundered, vacuumed and cleaned. I waited on her endlessly while she criticized each performance. And so it went, off-and-on again, mostly on, through my sixth and seventh grade years, then the eighth, and into the next summer. It seemed I would no sooner get free of my feminine-uniformed servitude than she would find yet

another disobedience or insubordination to convict me and I would be back in servile finery. I complained to Dad, but he said Doris was in charge and I must try to please her. He almost whined that if I made trouble then it made trouble for him and he asked me to submit for his sake. I did!

When I was near thirteen I took a part in a school play. Dad's fortunes had turned and I was enrolled in an exclusive boy's prep school where one of the customs was the annual presentation of a collection of one-act plays early in the fall term. In the best traditions of the theater, and because of the lack of girls in the student body, all the parts were played by boys. In my debut on the boards I was cast in the dowager role in a farce; "Gas, Air and Earl."

Marjorie and Gram were delighted. Doris was furious. She objected to my being in a private school at all and had fought it for over a year. She regarded it as undemocratic and elitist. A battle royal ensued over the issue of my being in the play. Dad finally had to settle it and he ruled in favor of Marjorie and Gram.

I was to be allowed to appear on the stage en femme, and I was to stay at Marjorie's over the two weeks it took to prepare for the play, which deprived Doris of her maid-servant. Dad's decision was unusual, for it was the domination of him by his mother and sister that so infuriated Doris and which always led to another term as lady's maid for me. We all should have seen that trouble was brewing.

While I was with them, Marjorie and Gram got busy in the sewing room running up my costumes: a tea gown for scene one and a ballgown for scene two. The tea gown, was a mid-calf length confection of coral colored lace cascading the length of a rose faille underdress. They bedecked me in strands of pearls and topped off my coiffure with a huge, elegant hat, dripping with ribbons and a great ostrich plume. I loved it! I had never felt so feminine. For the second scene, I was caparisoned in a black, satin, ball gown with a draped fishtail skirt and train. I flaunted a lace fan and wore full length black, kid, gloves. It was all great fun and working with Gram and Marjorie and the costumes was a joy I shall never forget. Even the play went wonderfully and on the following Monday at school, I received high praise from my fellow students and the faculty for my excellent debut as a comedienne.

Marjorie, Gram, and Dad had attended, of course, and were lavish in their praise. Doris, also of course, was not there. She spent the evening with her step-niece, Betty, perfecting her revenge. Doris detested being thwarted in any way and the critical success of my stage debut inflamed her rage.

Dad, on the other hand, harbored ideas about upward social mobility. He rather preferred to see me playing a princess or, on the stage, a duchess (however comically) than working as a lady's maid. The family tradition of bettering each generation, he reminded Doris, was the reason for my being in a prep school and no longer in public school.

The curious thing is that even I could sense that my transvestitism was not at issue here; only Cynthia's station in life was in question. I think that my transvestitism was a given by this time. I was running to Marjorie's at every opportunity to get away from Doris and to spend time in the finery that she and Gram kept on hand for my visits.

Complicating this picture was the fact of my firm entrenchment in prep school. Doris continued to protest, parading her democratic ideals, but her real objection was that the prep school took me out of her grasp. Early on I had recognized the partial refuge from Doris my enrollment in the private school offered, and managed to convince Father that I should attend summer school sessions as well as the regular school terms. Further aggravating her was the fact that Marjorie and Gram liked the idea and had influenced Dad in his decision to allow me this escape.

Near the end of my second summer in private school, Dad settled the matter with yet another of his great compromises: I would be allowed to continue in the private school so long as my grades and deportment were acceptable. If I failed, for any reason, then Doris would be allowed to send me to a vocational school; there to be trained in beauty culture, after which I would work for Betty in her salon. In the meantime it was agreed that I would stay at home and pay no more visits to Gram and Marjorie.

Doris, for her part would no longer use me as her maid and I would be allowed to use my free time as I wished, including participation in any-and-all extracurricular activities. Somehow Dad overlooked the fact that his decision gave Doris a vested interest in my failure at school. Even I, at my tender years, could see that the door of the Beauty Parlor stood wide open, ready to close behind me at the first appearance of failure on my part and Doris stood close at hand; waiting to grease the rails that would carry me into the world of working girls. She waited patiently for my first failure or for me to defy or contradict her, at which time the locked closet in my bedroom opened to reveal finery of such elegance as I had never imagined.

“If I can't cast you in the role of maid I will dress you as your father's precious princess.” she decreed after my first “transgression” early in October. “Your aunt and grandmother are not the only ones who know how to dress a girl. If they want you in dresses and tresses, then in dresses and tresses you shall be. I don't believe it is possible to make a lady of such a wretched and perverse thing as you, but I shall try. We shall have charm classes and lessons in feminine deportment. I won't promise that you will be a princess, but I do promise you that before I am finished, you will be a perfect little doll, indistinguishable from any girl of your age. Then we shall see how much you like a girl's life, shan't we?”

I assured her that I would like it very much, hoping against hope that somehow, cooperation and compliance might ease my sentence. I was to discover it was an empty hope and that there was not to be “peace in our time” as many who compromised before me had so painfully learned.

“I want you to understand that this is a penance and not a reward. I saw you kissing Melanie Stensrud on the lips during the Columbus Day dance last Saturday. I have it from Mrs. Stensrud personally that Melanie was offended by your aggressive behavior. You will do penance in female attire until she has forgiven you for that act of sexual misconduct.”

This pronouncement confused me terribly. I made no secret that at nearly fourteen I had reached the age where I liked girls. I liked the way they felt and the way they smelled. I liked almost everything about them, especially the way they made me feel when I held them and kissed them. Now Doris was saying there was something wrong

with those feelings and seemed to want to instill in me the belief that my love for girls and my desire to be intimate with them was inherently evil. Something was very wrong here. But I should not have been surprised. Something always went wrong when Doris became involved in my affairs. I didn't know what to believe except to realize that somehow I was to be the goat in this circumstance.

It was a very awkward situation. Melanie, apparently feeling that she needed to make an appearance of propriety to her mother had fallen into line with the charade. As a result it was beginning to look like my time away from school for the foreseeable future, was to be spent in elegant frocks and gowns, begging Melanie's pardon on a daily basis.

Once again Doris was turning my joy in crossdressing into something about which I was to feel guilty and ill-at-ease. Melanie seemed embarrassed by the situation, not, I suspect, because I was begging her pardon dressed as a girl, but because we both knew that she had double-crossed me by claiming offense at my advances. This experience did give me a distrustful feeling about women for some time thereafter, but distrust is not the same thing as distaste.

As she laced me into the corselette each day, Doris would lecture me on her favorite theme: My lack of conscience. She insisted that I had no principles or I would never have imposed as I had on such a nice girl. For my part, I believed my liking girls had nothing to do with conscience. Nonetheless, she would gussie me up in her version of finery and send me off to beg Melanie's pardon.

Melanie treated the whole thing as rather a joke and ended up stringing me along for weeks, causing me to make dozens of these appearances, some of them in evening gowns, before she granted me her pardon.

When Melanie at last pardoned me, I managed for a time to keep Doris from unlocking the closet by playing the model citizen. I even found time, and the spirit, to go out for the wrestling team, a sport at which I thought I might succeed. As a wrestler I would only compete against boys my own size and more importantly, wrestling would allow me to give some expression to my masculinity. I suppose that Doris must have been succeeding in "criminalizing" in my mind, my growing love of finery for I was beginning to feel more and more frequent misgivings concerning the appropriateness of my dressing as a female. I developed a growing need to prove that my love of finery did not make me a queer or a faggot, as almost any person who deviated from the accepted norm was called in those days.

Little did I suspect that Doris might find a way to turn my decision to become a macho-athlete to her advantage, but turn it she did. It was a rule that any student participating in athletics would provide the school with a doctor's certification of good health, and I was no exception. I was not comfortable with Doris's choice of a female physician to perform the examination, but Dad was out of town and we did not have a "family doctor", as such.

And so it was that I found myself on a Saturday morning, sitting in the empty waiting room of the young woman doctor who had been at the desk, typing, when Doris and I entered. She and Doris had immediately gone into an adjoining room and closed the door, leaving me to look for some sports magazine or something a boy would read,

among the clusters of women's magazines on the tables about the room. I had given that up and was looking at the pictures on the walls when the two women returned and I was told by Doris to go with the doctor for my examination.

I had been fearful that I would be expected to appear naked for my physical, but the doctor only had me strip down to T-shirt and shorts while she prodded, poked, listened to and peered at me; then took my temperature and jabbed my index fingertip to take a tiny drop of blood on a slide. The only really embarrassing part was when she had me drop my shorts and cough while she held my testicles. She left for a minute and then came back with Doris who told me that the doctor wanted to take a little mole off my bottom and that I should get up on the table and lay on my stomach. I didn't much care for that but then the doctor put her oar in the water:

"It appears you are a very healthy boy, and there is no reason you should not go out for the team," she said, smiling at me. I was relieved that she had not found a reason I should not compete, for I had become distrustful enough of Doris to suspect that she might try to somehow use the doctor to block me from this activity. But apparently my fears were groundless, so I got on the table as the doctor finished cheerfully, "You do have that mole on your bottom and sometimes in wrestling, such things can become irritated and cause problems. It would be best to remove it today. Just lay on your tummy for a minute and I'll give you a little shot, then you won't feel a thing."

Like any one else, I disliked the idea of having a shot, but I bravely lowered my shorts, jumped slightly at the icy touch of the alcohol swab, winced at the stab of the needle and then lay quietly while the local took effect. There was a sensation of pressure on my right cheek, a feeling of being pushed and pulled about back there, and then the doctor patted my behind and told me I could get dressed.

I clambered off the table, pulled up my shorts and climbed into my Levis. After putting on and buttoning my shirt, I followed the two women to the waiting room to sit down across the room from Doris, while the doctor sat at the desk and began to type again, saying it would take just a few minutes for her to finish filling out the forms. In a few minutes Doris had the papers in her hand, and I had followed her from the office. I was just outside the door when Doris looked back in at the doctor, saying:

"Thanks Evie, I really appreciate this and I won't forget how much you helped me today."

"It's nothing, Cuz. What's family for, huh? Gimme a call. You and Betty and I can have lunch some Thursday. The old goat plays golf then and I can close the joint up. I'll be interested in hearing how things develop."

"I'll call you." Doris said as she hastily closed the door and flounced down the hall and out the building.

"You sure have a lot of relatives." I commented as she maneuvered the car out of the parking lot. She looked at me with surprise, but said nothing. "She called you Cuz . . . does that mean she is your cousin?"

"Well, yes, but she's perfectly capable and she knew exactly what she was doing."

"Gee, I sure hope so. I mean, she is a doctor, right?" Doris's look of surprise had turned to one of annoyance and her fingers tightened on the steering wheel.

“Of course she's a doctor. What makes you think she isn't?”

“Uh, nothing. I didn't mean anything. I just . . . ”

“You're just being a smart alec, and a snobbish little snot . . . That's what you are, just!” Doris snapped. “You can't stand the idea that someone in my family might be a success too, can you? Well, you'll see whether or not she knew what she was doing. Just wait . . . ”

“Aw, c'mon Doris. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you mad.”

“I'm not mad, you little snip, but I have had just about enough out of Robert for a while. I think it's time for Cynthia to spend a few weeks with us.”

I tried to protest, but her thin lipped, angry expression made it very clear that any further discussion would only make matters worse. I spent the remainder of the weekend being Cynthia as usual. The place where the doctor had taken that mole off healed up pretty quick, but when I would press it real hard, I could still feel a lump under the skin. I decided it must just be scar tissue. Little did I know. At any rate, I had clearly annoyed Doris greatly for after that weekend and over the next two and a half months, any moment that was not taken up with school, drama club, or wrestling, I spent as Cynthia.

And then, one dreary mid-January day, I trudged home in the darkening gloom of late afternoon, musing on the words of the coach who had finally suggested to me that perhaps I should concentrate on some activity that was less strenuous than wrestling. When I protested that I wanted to continue to try to make the team, he gently, but firmly pointed out that such an eventuality was unlikely, and seemed to become more unlikely with each passing week. I had not won a trial match in six weeks, my endurance seemed less than it had when I had first come out for the team and my physical training scores, the record of my repetitions of conditioning exercises, was gradually slipping; all in spite of my best efforts. Where I had been able to do thirty sit-ups when I first went out for the sport and had advanced in five short weeks to doing almost ninety, I was now back down to forty, and struggling to maintain that. And the same was true of all my other scores and repetitions. It seemed that no matter how hard I trained, I continued to lose ground.

Other boys were developing the muscularity typical of wrestlers; even the skinniest showed a stringy hardness while I seemed to be developing a soft fleshiness over my entire body that hid what musculature and strength I had managed to acquire by my hard work. At last, I had given in and gone with the coach to the empty locker room, where he helped me take my gear from my locker and put it all into a small canvas bag he had loaned me. It seemed such a final thing when he took the keys I had been issued, slipped the ring over the loop of the padlock and snapped it shut. I was no longer “out for wrestling”.

What was worse, I had been spending so much time in Doris's “charm” classes that I did not always manage to do my homework as well or as thoroughly as I might. Now my grades were suffering, and the drama coach had warned me, several days ago, that if my classroom marks did not show improvement in the coming weeks, I would not be allowed to continue in that activity either.

I tried to rise early, to do my homework in the mornings before Doris could start in on me, but I couldn't find the energy. For weeks now, I had been feeling less than perfectly well. There had been days of feeling nauseated, ongoing bouts with diarrhea, and unpredictable outbursts of emotion. Oddly, the only person who seemed tolerant of these complaints, was Doris; but even that tolerance did not mean a lessening of my time as Cynthia. The specter of Beauty School loomed on the horizon, and I was becoming enormously discouraged.