

Cheap Revenge

Inez Baranay

Just before midnight I'd enter the girls-only space as a man disguised as a woman and leave it as me. This was not easy to explain. I remembered what Alison had told me only the night before.

"Do you know what I mean? Something you wanted so badly—you finally get it—it doesn't mean the same."

Alison was finishing the story of her answered prayer. "By the time this call came, I didn't care."

"The tragedy of the wish come true."

We paid our bill and stepped out into the buzzy trashed night of Oxford Street.

"Well I'm glad we saw it anyway," we said of the stupid movie. "And that was good," we said of the restaurant we'd just tried, enjoying some beers with our Mexican food and babbling our way through several intense topics of conversation: her work, my work, the world. "And tomorrow then, dearest," we said, kissing, "tomorrow night."

We had a regular date to go dancing at Puta Scandalosa: girls' night, Sundays at Roget's just down the road. We'd done it twice and were going to do it forever.

She got into her car and I turned to walk home. Consumers of culture were milling at nightclub entrances, restaurants were closing, and substance-enhanced people were hailing taxis. It was late enough to arrive at the dance party at the showground that night.

I was going home to sleep, for now the walk through Darlington all of my thrill. Tomorrow night around this hour I'd be out. I hadn't seen much of Ali for ages—sometimes career and travel steal time—but now we were both "around," as we said, "for now." Keeping late hours and invigorated by some novel gratitude: alive, well, fit; you didn't take it for granted these days that we still were up to it, going dancing, our hips bumped by girls so young we were never like that.

I struggled to wake up. I was on my sofa. When I'd come home I must have passed out immediately. I felt most peculiar and thought immediately of food poisoning. It wasn't just nausea, or not even nausea at all exactly. More a drugged, half-dreaming sensation that wouldn't go away, even as I pinched myself and reached for my glass of water. It *was* nausea, actually.

It was as if I couldn't get back into my body as I woke— or came to. But also I was very much in my body, which felt violently disturbed, or perhaps disturbingly violent. I struggled to recognize myself; my hands flew to the cushiony solace of my breast; horror infested mystification. I really did not seem to be asleep.

I stood and nearly keeled over with the unfamiliar center of gravity. The fact of a metamorphosis sank into my apprehension.

It was three A.M. and I was coming out of shock. My body had transformed, or I had transmuted, and though somehow I knew I was still I, I was no longer I. How could I be?

Did this mean, though, that I was now a man? If a man is a person with a penis. I looked at it from every angle, using mirrors. I had always found my cunt entirely beautiful—a flower, a seashell, sweet-talking lips. This new set of apparatus aroused a different fascination, ambivalent, tinged with pride and protectiveness. My horror dissolved in my curious attention to the sensations of my mind and the responses of my new body.

As I stroked my dick—I think it was a dick at this point, rather than a penis or a cock—as if to soothe my puzzlement away, it responded with a heated swelling. As a sensation for my hand this was not entirely unfamiliar, and yet its own commanding sensation was original. Getting hard didn't feel quite the same as getting wet, I didn't think, but it was odd that I was no longer sure. Certainly I experienced an inner arousal pushed out, for a moment, anyway, until it seemed too peculiar to think it could be otherwise.

Sticky with saliva, the dick throbbed—but then felt cold and lifeless, for my puerile action suddenly seemed so pathetic I was unable to continue. The sense of being watched had become unnerving, even though the watcher was me.

A man I knew who liked to wear dresses said he enjoyed how they made him feel: more elegant, more alert to his body. I had always liked men in frocks. I'd always liked women in butch apparel, especially if subverted by some lace or lipstick. Which I would forgo, now, as I was already sufficiently deconstructed. I decided on the jeans, T-shirt, sweatshirt, boots. An imitation for which there is no original.

I had enjoyed the remnants of male association previously held by this attire. As these supposedly degendered items had been worn by the woman I was, I now suspected them of being imbued with an aura of the female, lending an androgynous cast to my otherwise masculine new appearance. This could not be a bad thing.

I surveyed my arsenal of moisturizers with bemusement and had an odd swift wish for a toolbox: spanners, screw- drivers, wrenches—whatever they were.

The clothes fit, but not in quite the same way. I took off the sweatshirt, as I no longer felt the cold. I was disappointed that I had not grown any taller.

I live in this part of town because it's the part that never closes. But at four a.m., the streets have quieted. And look who I see, as if I'd been looking for her.

We used to nod a vague, barely acknowledged recognition of each other back when I used to work the graveyard subediting at the paper. I'd be on my way home around now, and often stop right here for a last cappuccino before turning in.

Although she was paid for her appearances in *Woman's Day* and on *60 Minutes*, she had found that five-minute fame doesn't keep you in hormones and body wax, and was working the same old beat.

She doesn't recognize me now. Zanni the Tranni leans into her doorway and bends one knee to prop her foot on the wall behind her. As I approach she waves a sodden cigarette at me. "Got a light, love?" she inquires in a husky voice ravaged by irony.

"Don't smoke," I say, but I've stopped.

"No vices, eh?"—winking as she puts the cigarette back into the pocket of her pink jacket. She whispers then— "Short time, long time, hand job, blow job, full strip. Visa, Amex."

I follow her. Inside the doorway rickety steps lead to the demesne other disclosures. It is an area lovingly designed in the hot pink, tigerskin patterns, and amber prints of olden-days TV stars.

"All I want to do is talk."

"Oh, shit." She shrugs with weary tolerance. "Cost you double." She sits heavily atop the creaking bed. "Any specific topic of converzazionay?" Her head tilts to one side in a gesture of attempted coquetry; it comes out as mild contempt.

"You were saving for an operation," I begin.

She assents with a gracious inclination of her bewigged head, apparently not displeased to be recalled to her tabloid moment.

"Just tell me something. Why did you want it off?"

She looks at me with patience and disdain. "How would you like to be a woman with a dick?"

She has the tits and the smooth face that I don't—not any longer or not for the moment. "That's just it," I begin, and fall silent.

"I don't guarantee satisfaction," she answers my silence. "I only do what I've been asked. Talk is a two-to-tango thing." She crosses her thick legs, displaying broad knobby feet in green satin platform shoes. "How much do you think it costs to get these shoes custom made?" she inquires bitterly. "People who inhabit their assigned gender don't know how lucky they are."

Her practiced sensitivity overcomes her self-absorption. "Why so glum?" she observes with momentary though gracious focus. "You seem all man to me, or man enough. I'm almost tempted to throw in a favor, but a deal's a deal. So what's up? Speak to me, darling. Many disparate desires dwell in dicks. You like to wear a frilly silken cami next to your hairy chest, nothing wrong with that, sweetheart."

"What if I don't want my dick?" I inquire, uneasy, for perhaps Zanni and I aren't in quite the same boat, and maybe not the same sea. Or what?

"It'd be a waste," she says flirtatiously, looking me up and down and up, batting her thick nylon eyelashes. Evidently she is unmoved by my peculiarity.

"Am I a man?" I implore.

She flares. "Youse make me sick, you think every one of us is bloody Tiresias with all the answers, youse all think sex has the answer to it all. Your time's up." She shows me the door.

I don't move.

"But wait—what if I know more about being a woman? Is knowledge of yourself as a woman erased in a man's body?"

She starts shoving. I resist. "Wait," I say. "Then what is a woman? You said you'd always been a woman—before the operation."

She picks me up in her strong though smooth-skinned arms.

"No, wait," I implore, gasping at the fumes of her scent. "Is sexual inscription a rewriting of an ontologically prior differentiation?"

She staggers with me to the landing.

"I know gender has a fluid range of possibilities. ..." I plead.

She throws me down the stairs.

What am I now? Shy, good with cars, keen to arm-wrestle in pubs? Should I turn on the TV for one of those ball games? I go to the computer to see if I suddenly want to tinker with the programs. Maybe I could call my publisher at his house—fuck what time it is, I could get really assertive here, or at least arrange a game of golf.

Yeah, what about all that male privilege I've always been angry about? Here was my chance to work it. I had the dick; that was all I needed. We'd always said so.

Hey, I'm not that kind of man. I'm unfettered by conditioning; my desire to get in touch with my feelings cancels out my need to find some guy I could beat at something. I need some understanding.

A dirty dawn light seeped into the cafe. It was always open and served coffee that blew your head off. The women didn't look as if they'd been partying all night. They looked as if they were between college lectures. Anything's possible in the city. I didn't look away; they couldn't make me. They were probably attracted to me, my cuts and bruises signalling an atavistic manly appeal: a warrior, a tough guy, walking the line.

I didn't realize I was staring. The three women glanced at me, leaned toward one another, muttered, glanced again. I had been staring. Why were they so offended? Think hard, try to remember. Why weren't they flattered?

"Ignore him," one said, loud enough for me to hear. That was me at a younger age, turning my back—what a naive tactic. "Never turn your back, honey," I thought now. "We're all beasts, and backs are for jumping."

"Confront him," said the other, pushing back her chair. Uh-oh, another former self, acting as if her integrity required a show of umbrage and confrontation. And then she'd wonder why I'm convinced she's interested.

"Maybe," pleaded Three, tugging at Two's jacket as she rose, "we could ask, explain ..."

I saw myself, younger still, believing all would be understood between fellow human beings of goodwill. Certain she could conciliate, sure she could soothe. My heart ached, I had been all of them once. Give it up, girls, I thought. "There are no victories."

I leaned toward them. " 'Scuse me ladies, I can't help noticing..."

"Can't help . . . ! take no responsibility . . . *women* to you ..." they mutter, letting me hear but not quite addressing me.

"You don't know me!" I was startled and hurt. How could they dislike me already? "If you don't want to talk to me, why do you look so pretty?"

"Not for your benefit," Two snarled.

It took me a moment to identify the discomfort of a growing erection tightening my jeans. Oh, gross, how inappropriate. Here I was all brotherly protectiveness and sisterly empathy, and here was a hard-on. My feeling for this right-ully resentful young woman was not lustful, I swear. The body has a mind of its own.

"Can't you see we're not here to talk to you?" Three suggested in a tone I guess I can't call patronizing.

"Just one question," I said, sounding very reasonable. "We're all human beings, aren't we? Is 'man' what I am or what I do?"

Reasonable did not impress.

One growled, "A man typically turns to women for attention to questions of emotion and identity." Like I was an exhibit, the evidence. So much for ignoring me. Just like me in those days when I had the theory.

Three declared with sorrowful insightfulness, "It's a *manipulative* ploy to engage us; he isn't interested, look at him—only into himself."

Two said, choking with anger, "I'd like to show him, show 'em all—oh, if only I had a dick for a day."

"Yeah!" went the others, "Yeah."

I reeled with revelation. "Only by becoming anatomically male do you stop hating men," I said excitedly. "That's what that wish is about, not some cheap revenge fantasy!"

"Jesus . . ." and they pushed back their chairs and flung themselves out of there.

Wasn't there a story where a siren changed men into swine? I see them, a bunch of startled pigs hurtling down an ancient Greek hillside. Homer, wasn't it? These transmogrifications were always a punishment or a test.

Or a way for a sly god to fuck some maiden: they turn into swans, bulls—some creature more irresistible than a man.

But this is a New Age era and there are no outside gods, only your own powerful choices.

I hadn't been the kind of girl I'd been brought up to be, and didn't grow into the kind of woman. Plus, I was responsible for the current widespread cultural confusions about sexuality, gender, and identity. In the sense that in the careful patterns of Chaos it might be my own personal contribution to the entire ecological totality of it all, that was one of those last-straw things, like a single beat of a butterfly wing that can cause derangement. More theory. As for practice, well. I confess I had not slept with anyone, man or woman, for—oh, never mind. I forget. Ages. Dating straight and gay men and women but never doing sex, I'd turned into that trendy cliché, the queer heterosexual. Not that I was, on that 1-to-6 scale they used to have, entirely het. I figured I was only expressing some of the complex affections, attractions, and restraints that were appropriate for now. The trajectory of my life had, along the line, disqualified me from both monogamous couples modeled on marriage and casual promiscuity. In my fantasy, without boring you with particulars, I was bi, gay, multi, omni, and equipped with selected accoutrements and accessories out of those tasteful pastel catalogs they advertise in women's magazines. How could I claim none of this was my actual experience? Imagination is experience, and experience is knowledge. Didn't I think so? Did that make me a man?

"You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," I begin when she picks up the phone.

"Who is this?" she asks.

"It's me—Inez. Well. . ."

"You sound strange; are you sick? You're not piking out of tonight? It's keeping me working all day."

It was a Sunday, but an independent film producer has no day of rest

"I do want to go tonight. . . . Something strange has happened to me." I did not know how I'd ever imagined for the tiniest second that I could even begin to tell. "Ali," I said, "they don't let men into tonight, do they?"

"Did you want to ask someone?" she says, sounding disappointed. "No they don't. Can I call you back? I've got London on the other line."

"Alison, what's happened – " I begin, but only in my head do I form the words *is so weird I don't know where to start*. "Hey, I'll try and explain tonight."

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