



SUMMARY: When his girlfriend's best friend dies, Larry mysteriously finds himself changing into the likeness of the dead girl

## **mBEST OF FRIENDS**

**By Valerie Hope**

She told herself to stop, but the tears seemed to just keep coming. Larry didn't know what else to do except hold her close, stroking her hair and giving her a haven against the pain, not saying anything, just being a rock for her to cling to.

"I can't believe she's gone," Susan finally managed to croak. "I was just talking to her."

"Shh," Larry said quietly, pressing his gentlest kiss into her temple. "Try not to think about it."

"I never even got to say goodbye," Susan managed, before a fresh flood swept her away.

Larry gazed over the top of her head at the entrance to the county morgue, where he'd just left. Susan had waited outside while he went in to identify the body of his lover's best friend Dawn, killed in a brutal car accident on the interstate. It had been nobody's fault, just one of the random occurrences of nature that made people mad at God. One moment breathing, smiling as was her wont, and the next Dawn was gone and leaving the woman he loved to cope with the loss. Dawn and Susan were inseparable since high school, sharing one another's lives and hopes in a way that Larry never could. There hadn't been very much closeness between Larry and Dawn before she'd died, which made it easier to cope with the loss. He was saddened - he'd liked Dawn - but he wasn't as devastated as his lover. She'd lost more than a sister. She'd lost the emotional equivalent of her own right arm.

"I'm so sorry, love," he whispered.

"It's not fair," Susan said in a strangled voice.

"It never is," he replied, stroking her hair and cradling her head beneath his chin. "It never is."

"I want her back," Susan said, her voice gaining a force borne of anger. "I want my best friend."

"I know you do," he replied gently. "I want her back for you, love."

"I've lived without money. I've lived without hope. I've even lived without love," Susan whispered painfully into his chest. "But I've never had to live without my best friend."

"I can't imagine what you're going through," Larry whispered. "I wish I could help you. I wish I could give you back your best friend. I truly do."

She clutched him tight, crying with renewed force and anger. *Work it out, my love*, Larry thought. *Get the poison out. I wish I could give her back to you. I wish I could give you back your best friend.*

A sharp pang of selfish hurt bubbled up, long nursed but kept carefully in the shadows. *Hell*, he thought a little bitterly, *I wish I could be your best friend now.*

Behind him, the painting on the wall glowed slightly and the figure in the portrait, an old man in colonial garb, closed its eyes. Larry never noticed, holding his lover tight to his chest and wishing as he tried to will away her pain.

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The thunder crashed and the lightning limned the silhouetted figure in blue-white light, clearly showing the flintlock pistol in his trembling hand.

"You'll learn, by God," the man said harshly, the tremble in his voice matching the one in his hand.

"Pray, a moment," Sebastian Halverson said placatingly, raising his hands. "A moment. Don't let's be hasty, sirrah. We can talk about this."

"I spit on your *talk*," the man said. "I didn't starve and freeze in every valley between here and Yorktown under General Washington to be treated so. I have a wife and a child, you monster. Given life and fortune by God Above, and by that very God I'll not sit by while you put them out in the cold for want of coin. I won't!"

"Jonathan, please," Sebastian said. "I'm sure we can reach a reasonable --"

"You know full well that I haven't a farthing to my name. The blight got the wheat. I'll be debt until I'm grey and toothless. And if you don't evict now, then when? I know you, Halverson. I fought your Tory brethren in the war. So if it's coin you want, then I'll pay you in the direst coin of all."

"Jonathan..."

"Enough talk," the tenant farmer spat. "My wife pled with you. She begged you, bent her pride and knelt before you. You gave her a choice to either lift her skirts for you or have our family put out. I won't stand for it. Not now, not ever. I suggest you make your peace."

Halverson's will broke. "Our Father, which art in Heaven..."

"I curse your name, Halverson. Damn you to Hell. May you never find peace until you've learned how to grant the wishes of grieving men and women."

The click of the flintlock was as loud to Halverson's ears as the thunder.

"Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven..."

He never heard the blast. He only knew the cold press of the floorboards beneath his face, the sticky flood of his life spilling between his fingers, and the cold eyes of his own portrait staring down at him, as if in judgment, from above the crackling fireplace.

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The apartment was eerily quiet. Susan had finally cried herself to exhaustion and he'd left her sprawled, trembling, across the bed. Taking his duties as "rock" seriously, he entered the small kitchen and set about preparing food. He knew Susan would never think of a thing like eating right now, and she needed food and rest and quiet. And what she needed, he vowed, he

would provide. Larry had never loved her more now that she was in such pain. She needed him, and he liked the feeling.

She'd never needed him, before. So strong and willful and competent. She was an account manager for a large computer company downtown, all smart business suits and direct talk and eye contact. Larry McNamara had never met her like and had fallen for her the moment he'd met her. She was smart, funny, and a true natural beauty. He'd spent the first eight months of the relationship in a daze, wondering what in the world a woman like her could possibly see in a man like him. He was handsome enough, supposedly, but awkward and shy around women and didn't hold too high an opinion of himself. Susan Kyle awed him, amazed him. She was everything he wasn't - confident, self-assured, beautiful. And when she'd needed, she'd always turned to Dawn. Now that she needed him, he felt vital and necessary for the first time in his life. He vowed to fulfill the role thrust on him to the best of his ability. She'd want for nothing on his watch.

He quickly and quietly prepared a light pasta salad, using leftovers and whatever was in the cupboard worth throwing in. He'd not eaten since breakfast, but his desire for something more filling was left behind. Susan liked to eat light, to maintain her figure. And if that's what she wanted, then that was what she was going to get. He filled two glasses with ice water and brought the lot into the bedroom.

Susan was sitting up, huddled in a blanket, smoking a trembling cigarette. He'd wished she would stop smoking for some time now, and usually gave her a hard time about it, but he figured that he'd best lay off for a while. Anything she needed, anything she wanted. She said she was going to quit when they talked about kids after they were married, anyway. It wasn't a pressing concern. Besides, it would remind her of Dawn. They'd had their first cigarette together their sophomore year in high school and had spent many a night on the back deck, talking about everything and smoking until the sun came up.

He sat gently on the side of the bed and put a hand on her knee, trying to ignore the stale smell of smoke in the room.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?"

She turned red-rimmed eyes to him. "Better. Thanks."

"I made us some dinner. Are you hungry?"

She offered a weak smile. "You're so sweet. But I don't think I want to eat right now."

He gave her the glass. "At least drink some water. You've got to be dehydrated."

She gave a thick, wet snort, dislodging the aftereffects of her crying. He offered her a tissue from a box at the bedside, which she accepted gratefully. "You've been wonderful, Larry. Thank you for everything."

"I love you," was his only answer.

She lay her head on his shoulder, looking up at the ceiling but not particularly seeing anything. She brought the cigarette to her lips, taking a deep pull, and released the smoke in a long curling plume towards the mirror on the far wall. Larry had tried to pull in his breath at the last moment, to keep from inhaling, but he'd mistimed and inhaled a mouthful of the stale blue vapor. He braced himself to cough or at least have watering eyes, his standard

reaction. But for some strange reason, it didn't smell as bad as he'd remembered. It actually tasted different than he remembered. It tasted kind of good, familiar, thick and bitter and comfortable. He looked down at the slender white tube between his lover's long-nailed fingers, the end still smeared a little from the remnants of the day's lipstick, the thin stream of smoke curling into a tangle above the covers. He felt a strange pull, a little tug of desire.

He actually wanted one.

He blinked twice in rapid succession and shrugged it off. Maybe he was taking this "best friend" thing a little too seriously.

"Larry?" she asked.

"Mm-hm?"

"I don't know you're tired or not, but would you... would you mind just..."

"Spit it out, sweetheart."

"I just want to fall asleep in your arms. I'm cold and I hurt and all I want is to just fall asleep with your arms around me. Would you do that?"

He smiled and kicked off his shoes while she stubbed out the cigarette in the bedside ashtray. Sliding down between the covers beside her, he wrapped his arms around her slender frame and cradled her against himself, drawing her in tight and close, reveling in the feeling of her baby-soft breaths against his neck. Slowly, the tension bled out of them both and sleep and the darkness claimed them both.

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The morning sun through the slats of the blinds fell across their faces, waking them around the same time. She was so soft, so young in the mornings. She ran fingers through his hair, resting her forehead against his chin, whispering a thick "good morning." He ran hands down the so-soft delicate flesh of her back, kissing her forehead gently.

"How do you feel?" he asked in a husky, sleep-thickened voice.

"Better," she said. "It doesn't hurt so much anymore."

"I'm glad," he told her, looking her in the eyes. "I don't like to see you hurt."

She smiled a shy, little girl's smile. "I love you."

"And I love you," he said back, returning her shy smile. "I know this is going to take a long time for you. I just want you to know that I'm going to be here for you whenever you need me. You can depend on it, Susan, I swear it."

"Thank you," she said. "But we should get up. The funeral is at 10. I need to go say goodbye."

He kissed her again and watched her as she slid from beneath the covers and walked towards the bathroom. She stopped a moment to get her glasses from the bedside table - she hated them, but he still thought she looked good in them - and slide them onto her nose. She shed the last days' clothes, a simple pair of chinos that displayed her curves quite deliciously and a delicate pink blouse, a shell-colored bra which had left red marks across the creamy flesh of her back and the tops of her breasts from sleeping in it, and a little white cotton bikini brief

which hugged her pert little bottom wonderfully. She turned to him, her chestnut shoulder-length hair swirling out of its morning tousle, and stood before him naked, searching his face.

"What are you looking at?"

"You," he breathed. "I forget sometimes how beautiful you are."

She snorted again. "Stop. I look terrible."

"No, you don't," he corrected gently. "You always look beautiful to me."

She smiled, then crawled back onto the bed to his side, touching his face gently. "You're the sweetest man I've ever met," she told him in a breathy whisper. "I'm lucky to have you."

"You're not the only lucky one," he replied.

Her look became a little skewed with wry humor. "You could use a haircut, though."

His brow beetled a little. "I do? I just got it cut two weeks ago."

He ran a hand through his hair, and she was right. It was longer, and curling a little on the ends. Odd. It had never curled before, even when he wore it really long in college. He shrugged. "I'll call Rick and set up an appointment this week."

"I like it, though," she said, combing her fingers through his hair and sending tingles through him. "It's so soft now that it's got a little length. Maybe you can just trim it up a little, shape it, instead of cutting it off."

"You think? I always worry that my receding hairline is going to show up more if I wear it longer," Larry said.

Susan eyed him speculatively. "It doesn't really. Not to me."

Larry eyed himself in the mirror across the room. She was right again - it didn't show up. It even looked a little thicker on top. He shrugged again. "Will miracles never cease?"

"I'm going to take a shower, Larry," she announced, getting back on her feet at the edge of the bed.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"No, I'm fine."

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I'm going to get a little something, then. Kinda growly in the stomach this morning."

"Dawn was like that," Susan said wistfully. "Couldn't get going in the morning without tea and toast."

"That sounds really good," Larry said. "Maybe as a little tribute to her, that's what I'll have."

"We don't have any bread," Susan said sadly.

"Think she could settle for a bagel?" he asked.

"I think she'd like that," Susan said with a sad smile but eyes full of gratitude as she turned and went into the bathroom.

Larry stood up and took a step before he stumbled. Looking down, he saw that he'd stepped on the cuff of his trousers. His look became a little puzzled. They'd fit fine the last time he'd worn them. Now they seemed a little long for him and sagged around the waist a bit. They still fit okay in the seat, but everything else seemed to just hang on him. He smiled a little. Maybe he'd lost a little weight - that couldn't be all bad. He shucked his shirt and was a little alarmed to realize that he could slip his arms out of the sleeves without unbuttoning the cuffs. Weight he might have lost, but not *that* much. Maybe he'd better call Dr. Morris. Nobody should shed weight that fast and not be worried. And hadn't that shirt fit okay the day before? He didn't remember. He'd dressed in a hurry when he'd gotten the call from the police about Dawn.

Dawn's troubled spirit didn't get her tea and toast, unfortunately, but had to settle for a cream cheese bagel and a cup of coffee. As Larry sat against the counter waiting for his bagel to toast, sipping his coffee, he noticed Susan's purse laying open next to the phone. The edge of her box of Marlboro Lights 100s was peeking out, and Larry was struck with another urge like the one from the night before. Before he'd realized what he was doing, he'd fished the pack out and was looking into the half-full box. The white tubes rattled against each other as he stared, wondering what had come over him. He was all tense and edgy inside, like he'd just been through a very stressful situation. Something about the little white cigarettes seemed like an outlet.

Looking guiltily towards the bathroom door through the bedroom, he slid a cigarette from the package and held it awkwardly in one hand. He studied it from several angles while he sipped his coffee, from the tight-packed white filter to the open end packed full of shredded brown leaves. With a puzzled expression, he licked his lips and put the filter end between them. Using the kitchen matches, he struck a flame and pulled. The bitter, acrid taste filled his mouth, hot and somehow familiar. He blew the match out with a stream of smoke and dropped it down the disposer, studying the smoldering cigarette in his hand like it was some kind of a poisonous snake. Then, with a feeling inside like he was being led to the electric chair, he put the cigarette back between his lips.

Letting the smoke cool in his mouth a moment, he inhaled deeply and let the smoke out in a long, concentrated plume after holding it deep in his lungs for a moment. And all that tension and anxiety he'd felt before seemed to exhale out of his body with the smoke. It was wonderful. And the smoke left a pleasant taste on his tongue, bitter and sooty but familiar and thick. He took another deep pull, then another. The little "first one of the morning" buzz took hold behind his eyes, adding to the pleasure of the released tension. He sipped his coffee, and the tastes commingled on his tongue wonderfully. Apparently, coffee and cigarettes were made for one another.

He ran the end of the cigarette, now smoked down to the filter, under the tap and tossed it down the disposer as well, making short work of his bagel and the rest of the cup of coffee. He must've not been as hungry as he originally supposed, since the bagel and coffee had him feeling well stuffed. Maybe the weight loss had shrunken his stomach a little as well, decreasing his appetite. Or maybe he was getting sick. Sometimes that happened when he got a head cold.

He heard Susan shut off the water and climb out of the shower, so Larry stowed the cigarettes back in her purse and took another cup of coffee in to his lover. She accepted it gratefully, ceding him the bathroom while she chose what she was going to wear to the funeral.

He ran a hand over his jaw, but felt no stubble. He was one of the lucky ones, with a light, slow-growing beard which allowed him to go three or four days between shaves. Looks like this was one of the in-between days. The stubble didn't even really show - his hair was usually so dark when it came in that his face looked blue long before it was actually necessary that he shave. But his face was smooth as a baby's. Good. One less thing to worry about.

Susan came out of the closet wearing a black lace demi-bra and matching high-rise panties, worn under dark pantyhose which clung to her curves. She wore her hair in a turban formed from the towel and was looking down, holding a charcoal-grey wool skirt across her waist.

"Larry? Do you think I should wear this?"

He turned, his toothbrush sticking from between his lips. "That looks nice. You should wear it with your rose silk cowl-neck blouse and your grey blazer."

She looked at him a little curiously. "And you don't think it makes my butt look big?"

Larry shook his head. "Don't wear a belt and it will be fine."

She gaped at him in open amazement. "I didn't know you knew so much about clothes."

"Neither did I. I guess I just picked it up from listening to you and your friends. Besides, I know what I like to see you in."

"I always thought that constituted a leopard-skin teddy and garter belt," she said, coloring a little.

"Oh, please," Larry said, spitting out his toothpaste. "You know I think you're beautiful. Clothed or unclothed. And I know you like to look nice. Give me a little credit."

"I just can't believe I asked you. That's not the sort of thing I'd ever think to ask a man."

He smiled. "You miss your friend," he said gently.

She nodded sadly.

"I'm glad I can fill that hole a little," he added.

"I love you," Susan said, a little sniffly.

"And I love you. You gonna be okay?"

She nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Eventually," she said. "As long as I have you, I feel like I can get through this."

"You've got me," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Except the shower," Susan reminded him, her old familiar smile blooming on her face. "Hurry up. We're going to be late. Now move so I can put on my face."

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She'd finished her work by the time he'd dried his hair. His skin itched from the soap - it just seemed to rub him really raw this morning for some reason. And a lot of his chest hair had come out when he'd washed himself, as well. His chest looked positively sparse now. He resolved anew to call the doctor and set up an appointment. He was definitely getting sick.

Susan was an absolute Rembrandt when it came to makeup, he'd always thought. She'd worked in a beauty salon with Dawn when they were in high school, and they'd both done a lot of drama in there and in college. He loved to watch her put it on, to subtly emphasize or subdue her features, matching colors to clothes and hair, making the perfect picture. He wondered idly if she felt differently when she got dolled up than she did normally, if somehow the time she spent before the mirror worked an internal transformation of sorts to match the outer.

He toweled his hair dry and moved into the closet, putting on a fresh pair of briefs and an undershirt. Taking a blue dress shirt from a hanger, he slid his arms into it and pulled it closed around him.

It was like a tent. Huge. Only the tips of his fingers poked out the ends of the cuffs and the collar was wide enough to hold another neck like his own. Did the cleaners give back the wrong one? The label was faded and impossible to read. No way. This couldn't be his shirt.

Sliding through the clothes on the rack, he found himself looking idly across the walk-in to the racks of Susan's clothes. It was like looking from shadow to sunshine. On his side, there were only greys, navy blues and blacks, all subdued and somber. Cottons and polyesters, a little wool. But Susan's wardrobe was all colors, reds and yellows and greens and vivid blues and purples, and for every color there was a different cut and texture, from satin and silk to cashmere and cotton and linen. He sighed, turning back to his own rack. Too bad they didn't make men's clothes in so many colors like that. Then it might actually be a little fun to get dressed every now and again.

He finally found a dress shirt near the end of the rack that fit a little better, despite being a little baggy. It was a white with alternating blue and grey pinstripes. He didn't remember ever owning a shirt like that before, but he shrugged nonetheless and buttoned it up. He experienced a moment's confusion as he buttoned it, just for a second. It seemed for just an instant like the buttons were on the wrong sides. He blinked his eyes roughly and continued dressing.

His suit, which had been a little snug before, actually fit relatively well, even though the cuffs of the pants were a bit too long. It was a very dark grey with blue pinstriping, subdued and appropriate for a funeral. He rolled the cuffs under once or twice, to the detriment of the crease, and decided to give the garment a quick pass with the iron before he put on his shoes. He stopped for a moment to look at himself in the mirror, and the figure he cut in the suit.

A hand passed down the front of his belly showed off a very flat stomach. Damn, but he looked good. And the grey really made his complexion look ruddy and handsome. Only thing left would be to do something with his damp hair and then the right earrings...

*Earrings? Where the hell did that come from?* Larry thought. He rubbed his forehead a little and went into the kitchen to get the iron.

Susan was there, smoking a cigarette and nursing a cup of coffee. Larry felt a little stab of jealousy, but passed it over as he put a new razor-crease in his trousers. Sliding them on, they finished the outfit well. He took his dress shoes from the hall closet (he kept his lowly three pairs of shoes - sneakers, loafers and dress shoes there to make room for the horde of shoes that Susan had) and slid them on over his nylon dress socks. His feet slipped around in them

quite a bit. Had he even lost weight on his feet? Looking at the clock, Larry decided that this was no time to puzzle out a mystery. He simply reminded himself once again to make an appointment with the doctor and stuffed a page from the coupon circular into the toe of each shoe. He did get a little distracted doing so, just for a second, when he saw that Ross was having a 50% off sale on the most adorable little fleece pullovers this Sunday.

"You ready?" he asked.

Susan took a deep breath. "As ready as I can be," she said, putting a veiled wide-brimmed hat on and fixing it to her artfully arranged hair with a couple of bobby pins. "Let's go."

Larry grabbed his keys and sunglasses and followed her out the door.

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The funeral had been small and subdued, mostly close friends and family, but as was the custom in Dawn's family there was a huge reception afterwards, a celebration of her life, which mixed laughter with the tears and sent the girl's spirit heavenwards with something other than a gray pallor. She was missed, among the people she'd known, and respected and well-loved, and the reception was a wonderful way to see that.

Many people came close to Susan, to offer condolences and sympathy for her loss. But she was smiling, bravely but seemingly genuine. And it seemed to Larry that she clung closer to his arm when she said "it feels like she's still with me" to Dawn's mother. That made him feel very good, and closer to his lover than he'd ever been before.

Susan had become embroiled in a rather morose conversation about what to do with Dawn's personal effects and Larry had taken the opportunity to excuse himself and step towards the refreshments table to wet his throat. He knuckled the small of his back (he always got tight whenever he had to stand for extended periods) and scratched his scalp, only to be rewarded with a high-pitched *skritch-skritch* sound as his nails found the flesh beneath his hair.

He looked at his hand in curiosity. The nails seemed longer. He hadn't clipped them that morning, but they hadn't seemed quite that long in the shower. Oh, well. He'd clip them tonight. He had other things on his mind right now.

"Hey, Larry," Michelle said, one of Dawn's co-workers and a mutual friend of Dawn and Susan both. "How are you holding up?"

"Good. Yourself?" he answered.

"I'm all right. I miss her," Michelle replied. "You look good. The baggy look suits you. But I thought that you were into the tailored look. Did Susan talk you into trying something different?"

He looked down at himself. His suit *was* hanging from him baggily. Like he couldn't fill it adequately. Concern began to fill him, but he shoved it down quickly. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. He had to talk to Susan. Soon. But not here.

"How about you?" he countered, trying to change the subject. "You look great. That little bolero jacket is really cute on you. Have you worn it before?"

She blinked, backing up a little. "Yes, I have. I wore it to Susan's birthday two months ago."

"Is something wrong?" Larry asked.

"I don't know," Michelle answered. "You look different, and sound different. The things you say. And your voice, too. Is everything all right, Larry?"

He attempted an encouraging smile. "Sure. Why wouldn't it be?"

She backed away with some pleasantries, obviously uncomfortable. He narrowed his eyes a little bit as he turned back to the punch bowl. *Now she's probably going to whisper all over the room to everybody how weird and strange I am. That is so like her.*

Larry froze. He'd never thought like that about anyone in his life. He prided himself on not wasting time on other people's motives and just took what was offered to him. But that... that wasn't like him at all. That was downright catty, when he came right down to it.

What the hell was going on?

He sidled back into the conversation, appearing behind Susan. He put his hand on her waist, in what looked like a comforting gesture, but it was actually to steady himself. Because he used to be able to rest his chin on top of her head while standing flatfooted. And even with Susan in heels, he shouldn't have been staring straight into the back of her head. He was getting smaller. Shorter. He had no idea what was happening to him, and he tensed inside, a little panicky.

*God, I'm dying for a cigarette,* he thought.

The thought galvanized him. He leaned close to Susan.

"Babe, I'm not feeling very well," he whispered.

She turned to him, a little startled. "You're not?"

"No. I think I might be coming down with something."

She squeezed his arm. Was it his imagination, or did her fingers wrap further around his forearm than they ever had before? "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Do you want to take the car? I can get a ride home with someone."

"Are you going to be long?" he asked.

"Not too much longer," Susan said, looking around. "Things seem to be winding down."

"I can wait."

She looked at him curiously. "Why are you standing like that?"

Larry blushed a little. "I have to pee."

"Then go, silly," Susan said, giving him a playful shove.

He stood there for a moment, watching her. She raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Go," she ordered, turning her back on him.

He turned towards the bathrooms then, completely dazed. He'd actually been standing there waiting for her to go with him. Like it was the most natural thing in the world to go to the bathroom with a partner.

Things started make a little more sense. And that scared the hell out of him.

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He wasn't really sure how it had happened, but somehow he'd been volunteered to be the one who went through Dawn's apartment and boxed things up. The family was going to rent a moving van for him and he was going to take it all to Dawn's mother's house for them to go through before donating everything to charity. He'd agreed in a rush, just anxious to be out of there. The drive home seemed to take forever. He'd never been so jumpy in his life as when he'd found that he had to slide the seat forward two notches so his feet would reach the pedals and he caught himself instinctually checking his hair and eyes in the rearview mirror before he started the engine.

Susan went immediately into the bedroom to change clothes as Larry slumped onto the couch in a heap, loosening his tie. It couldn't be. These kinds of things just didn't happen. Not in real life. Something Michelle said stuck in his mind. He dashed into the kitchen then, fishing through the junk drawer until he found the little microcassette recorder he'd gotten for Susan several years ago. He lifted the microphone to his mouth and pressed record.

"Hi, you've reached Larry McNamara and Susan Kyle. Please leave us a message."

Leaning over the bar, he hit the button on the answering machine while he rewound the recorder. The answering machine beeped merrily and "Hi, you've reached Larry McNamara and Susan Kyle. Please leave us a message" came from the little speaker in Larry's smooth baritone. He pressed play on the little recorder right afterwards.

"Hi, you've reached Larry McNamara and Susan Kyle. Please leave us a message."

Susan entered to see Larry hunched over the bar, tears in his eyes, replaying the answering machine message over and over with one hand and the same message in the other on her old microcassette recorder. She rushed to his side, taking his face in her hands.

"Baby, tell me what's wrong," she said, looking into his tear-stained blue eyes.

"I'm turning into a woman," he answered in his breathy phone-sex contralto.

"That's ridiculous," Susan said, standing, never breaking contact with the clear blue eyes.

Blue eyes.

That had been brown that morning.

"Dear God," she whispered, backing up a step.

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He stood before the mirror in his undershirt and briefs, looking at his body with alarm in the full-length mirror as Susan folded his clothes with nervous energy behind him.

"I don't know how this can be happening," Larry whispered. "I just don't know how."

"Oh, my God," Susan said, holding up the dress shirt he'd worn to the funeral. "You wore this?"

"It was the only one that fit," Larry said.

"Larry, this is *my* shirt," Susan said, looking at him in shock. "I bought it for the Hallowe'en party two years ago, when I went as Charlie Chaplin. Don't you remember?"

Larry sank to the bed, his head dropping into his hands. Soft, gossamer bangs that hadn't been there that morning flipped across the tips of his fingers as the tears started coming again. He felt her arms around him. They'd used to not be able to reach quite all the way around him. Now they circled him easily. He felt them pressing into the small buds that were forming on his chest under the cotton undershirt.

"It's okay, Larry. We'll figure out how this happened. We'll find a way to reverse it."

"How?" Larry bawled. "How can we possibly reverse it? I don't even know how it happens."

"Maybe it's some kind of disease that we don't know about. Something genetic."

"Suse, I've been a biological male for twenty-eight-and-a-half years. You don't just catch a case of breasts. This isn't *Outer Limits*. It's real life. This stuff just doesn't spontaneously happen."

She made no answer. He looked up at her and saw her gazing at him in total shock.

"What was that you called me?" she asked in a flat voice.

"I said, 'Suse, I've been a male for..'"

She stopped him, eyes wide. "Nobody has ever called me that," she whispered. "Nobody except..."

"Dawn," Larry finished, replacing his head into his hands.

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"I've been all over the damn Internet a million times already," Larry said, trying to keep his longer hair out of his eyes. His undershirt was now down to about mid-thigh and the apartment was quite drafty now that he'd lost over half the hair on his legs. Now he had some idea why Susan was always complaining about the cold in the place. "The only things I'm finding about possession are a bunch of bullshit."

"There has to be something," Susan said. "Did you try the Library of Congress?"

"It was the first place I checked. Nothing but overviews and commentaries."

She picked up the phone. "I'll call Father Gilmartin over at the church," she said. "Maybe he knows something about this kind of thing."

Larry slumped back into the chair. "What's he going to say, Susan? What would you say if someone told you that her husband was being possessed and turned into a woman by the spirit of her deceased best friend?"

"Then what are we going to do?" Susan asked in a small voice.

He stood and opened his arms wide to her, wanting to comfort her the way he always did, regardless of what was happening to him. He took one step and his Jockey shorts fell to his ankles. He looked down at them in utter disgust.

Susan stood, trying to suppress a smile. "Are you okay?"

"I seem to have caught a mild case of femininity," Larry said, chuckling, "but other than that I'm doing all right. Yourself?"

She pulled him close. "Let's go see if I can find you something to wear," she offered.

\* \* \*

He'd originally thought he might feel strange, or deviant, or anything other than comfortable as he curled up on the couch wearing his lover's pink flannel pajamas and socks and a coiled bandanna to keep his lengthening hair out of his eyes. It was lightening rapidly as well, faded from its usual dark, dark brown to a honeyed chestnut. Susan came in from the kitchen, carrying two mugs of tea. She stopped short when she saw him.

"What is it?" he asked, reaching for a mug.

"You look... never mind," she said, looking away.

"Tell me," Larry pressed.

"You look adorable," Susan said, not meeting his eyes. "Those are really cute on you."

"Thank you," Larry said before he could stop himself. He cleared his throat to dismiss how nice that statement had made him feel. "They're, uh... they're really soft."

Susan sat next to him carefully, drawing one of her legs underneath her and leaning on to her shoulder. Larry sipped tea, and without thinking, reached over to Susan's pack of cigarettes and pulled out one for each of them, lighting both at once and passing her one once it was lit.

"You don't smoke."

"I don't, I know. But apparently Dawn really missed 'em," Larry said, blowing a long plume of smoke towards the ceiling.

"But they're not her brand," Susan went on. "She only smoked menthols, and she always gave me a hard time for smoking 'girly' cigarettes. She hated my brand."

Larry looked at his lover. "She did?"

"Yeah. She hated these. But you seem to like 'em."

"What else did she hate that I don't?" Larry asked, interested now.

"Two things stand out," Susan continued. "You still like coffee, and you said you liked the pajamas. Dawn couldn't stand coffee and she thought she looked like cotton candy whenever she wore pink."

"So maybe it isn't really her," Larry opined. "Maybe it's something else."

"I don't know," Larry said. "All I know is that I'm scared."

She squeezed his arm again. This time her middle finger and thumb almost spanned the circumference of Larry's arm. "I love you, regardless," she whispered. "We'll find out what caused this, Larry. And we'll fix it. We'll get you back to normal and we'll..."

Larry leaned his head back, still starting a little from the feeling of soft curls pillowing behind his neck when he did so. "Please, sweetheart, let's just talk about something else for a little while. If you don't mind."

Susan sighed. "All right, babe," she said comfortingly. "What about?"

"I don't know," he said. "Anything."

"Okay," Susan said. "Did you talk to Elizabeth Rossman at the reception today?"

"Oh, my God," Larry said in disbelief. "Did you see what that woman had on?"

Susan snorted and giggled a little. "Been fishing around in her ex-husband's closet again. That woman has absolutely no taste. Clogs at a funeral? That was so nasty."

"And what about Cassie Tyler? And that slab of beef she brought with her? Is that her new Neanderthal of the Week? And she's the one complaining about how men don't understand her. She should try dating one every once in a while instead of trolling around the shallow end of the gene pool..."

\* \* \*

Larry ground out his cigarette, looking out the kitchen window and stretching. The eastern horizon was starting to lighten, shredded by tufts of pink and azure as the sun peered over the edge of the world once again.

"I can't believe we talked all night," Susan said, yawning.

"I always wanted to do this with you," Larry said. "I was always a little jealous of Dawn and you when you'd do it. Kind of a 'no boys allowed' kind of thing."

"Hell, I'm just glad you reversed your stand on no smoking in the house," Susan said, taking her final pull and grinding out the butt in the overflowing ashtray. "But yeah. I'm glad, too. I had a good time talking with you. And you know something? I didn't miss Dawn once."

"I'm really glad of that," Larry said. "But, I guess I should get up and get going at some point. I've been snuggled up under this afghan since 10 o'clock last night and I have to go pick up the U-Haul soon and go over and take care of Dawn's old apartment."

Susan stood. "I'll take a shower and go with you. Would you mind?"

"No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I'd."

Larry had stood, and the fleece throw-blanket he'd been cocooned in all night fell away. To reveal two very prominent mounds which now tented the front of the pink flannel pajamas. Susan opened the blinds, throwing light across her body. It also revealed that Larry's hair, formerly a dark brown, was now a light ash blonde and fell down past the tops of his shoulders. It looked as soft as it felt and framed a face that used to be hard and angular and was now oval and almost delicate, dominated by eyes that were an alarming ice-blue.

"My God," Larry breathed, looking down at himself.

"You're beautiful," Susan added.

Larry blushed, looking away demurely beneath lashes that seemed a good inch long. "I am not."

"Of course you are. My God, Larry. You're breathtaking."

He looked up. "I guess I'm not going to find anything in my old closet for today, huh."

Susan grinned. "But I'm betting we'll find something in mine."

Larry stepped out from the closet slowly, almost afraid to look at himself in the mirror. When he opened his eyes, he saw something he never expected to see in a mirror. Something beautiful. His hair had continued to lengthen and lighten after his quick shower, in which he'd spent as little time possible washing his new breasts (which were extremely tender to the touch, with distended areola and positively huge nipples) or the tiny, denuded stump that had once been his penis. He'd left the steam on the mirror purposefully so he wouldn't have to look at his face, but Susan had other ideas. She'd gone through her closet exhaustively, searching through everything she owned for something that Larry could wear.

Now he simply gazed at himself, trying to take himself in as a total picture. The hair was a golden, honey blonde now with pale eyebrows and lashes to match. The lashes, which brushed his cheeks when he blinked, framed wide and innocent-looking ice-blue eyes which dominated an oval, cherubic face. He had a slender, aquiline nose with a little "ski jump" at the end and a small but expressive mouth. His teeth were even now, even the crooked one he'd had since he was eleven in the bottom front, and chalk-white. The complexion fairly glowed with health, a deep amber tan and unmarred by any blemish save for a little birthmark Larry had discovered on his left thigh. The breasts were high and compact, a very full B cup according to the bra Susan had scrounged, and probably still developing. Larry had confined them in a little red lace bra, a sexy little gift from an old boyfriend of Susan's that was too small but that she'd never thought to give away. Matching red lacy satin hi-rise panties concealed the positively meager bulge in Larry's crotch, making it almost seem to have a womanly mound instead. Then the figure-hugging pink "girlie" tee, with a tiny little red heart just above her breasts. Larry had to force himself to keep from pulling it down in front - even though the garment was *supposed* to bare his midriff, he couldn't help feeling like he wasn't completely dressed. Added to that an agonizingly tight pair of No Excuses jeans which felt like every square inch of his lower body was being hugged, showcasing a very long pair of legs and a very attractive derrière and a pair of women's hiking boots which fit surprisingly well, considering that they were a woman's 8½ and he'd worn a man's 12 two days earlier.

"You look fantastic," Susan said appraisingly, walking around her in a tight circle.

Larry touched his face. "I can't believe it's really me."

"I can't either."

Larry looked disparagingly at his tiny little hands with their three-quarter inch long nails. "I suppose I should cut these before we start moving boxes," he said.

"Don't you dare," Susan said. "I'd kill to have nails like yours. Save 'em. I'll take you to get some solars at the manicurist sometime. Those are far too pretty to cut off."

"I guess you're right. I haven't been poking myself with them nearly as bad as I used to."

"Getting instinctual?" Susan asked, concerned.

"I guess so. I never know where it's going to show up next. Like now, for instance," he said.

"What?"

Larry plopped down in the little chair behind the vanity. "As much as I'd like to, I can't let myself go out the front door until I've done something with my hair." Her hands, seemingly with a will of their own, began arranging the blonde locks into a neat French braid like they'd been doing it all their lives.

\* \* \*

The little rental place was deserted, thankfully, since Larry wasn't sure he could take much more of the staring that had been going on as he'd walked down the street from where they'd parked the car. The bored-looking man behind the register gave both he and Susan the once-over-not-too-lightly as they walked to the register.

"I'm here to pick up a 24-foot truck," Larry said.

"Name?" the man asked.

"McNamara. Laurence. Or Larry."

The man looked at Larry sidelong, typing on a grease-stained computer keyboard hunt-and-peck style. "That your husband's name?"

"Uh. yeah."

He looked down at the screen. "Sorry. No reservation for a Larry McNamara. Got one here for a Lori McNamara, though. That you?"

Larry froze for a moment. "Yeah. That's me."

"Larry and Lori. That's cute. Can I see your driver's license, ma'am?"

It took a minute or two for the "ma'am" to sink in, but it wasn't the worst of it. Larry fished in the second-skin pocket of the jeans and pulled out the driver's license. On it was a picture of a very attractive blonde woman with her hair artfully arranged, smiling, and the name very clearly stated "Lori Karen McNamara" alongside "sex - female, hair - blonde, eyes - blue." But when he'd put that card in his pocket - because he'd checked - it had very clearly showed a dark, ruddy-complicated man with tousled hair and labels saying "Laurence Carson McNamara, sex - male, hair - black, eyes - brown."

Susan peered over her shoulder and blew it off with a quick "I am so jealous of that picture, Lori. I wish I looked that good when they took mine."

Larry - Lori? - handed over the plastic card while the man typed on the keyboard a little more. Eventually he stopped, pulled down a set of keys from the wall and handed them to her, pulled a receipt from the daisywheel printer under the cabinet and passed it over to her with a greasy pen.

"Sign here, please."

Larry took the pen in shaking long-nailed fingers. Slowly, he gazed at the line and pressed the nib to the paper and wrote "Lori K. McNamara." The writing was very rounded and bubbly, not

his usual angular illegible scrawl. He'd even dotted the "i" over "Lori" with a little circle instead of just a dot. It looked entirely too much like the way the cheerleaders he'd known in high school had written.

*And why not?* he thought suddenly. *Didn't me and Suse cheer for Middleview together, and St. Mary's before that? I have every right to write like a cheerleader. I was a damn good cheerleader.*

He blinked, stunned. He'd never gone to either of those schools, much less been a young woman in one. But he very clearly and distinctly remembered going to St. Mary's and then Middleview with Susan, passing notes to her in Mr. Edwards' speech and debate class first period, kissing her first boy behind the refectory while Susan stood lookout, making out in the parking lot behind the vo-tech building with Bobby Flannery.

"You doing okay, ma'am?" the U-Haul salesman asked.

"Yeah. Fine," she said, rubbing her temples. "Just a little headachy. Thanks."

"You take care out there. That's a big truck."

*Like I can't see that from here, you schmuck.* "I'll be careful, thanks."

Larry didn't even think to get mad at him for automatically assuming such a frail, helpless girl like himself could never handle such a big, mean old rental truck like that until she was halfway to the parking slip. Her mind was in a total turmoil. How could she so clearly remember things that never happened? God, she hoped Susan had some old yearbooks or something around, to see if they'd changed the same way his drivers' license had.

"Lori!"

Lori spun to see Susan jogging to catch up to her. Susan's eyes were wide with shock. "I've been calling 'Larry' for the last three times. You didn't answer to it."

Lori waved her driver's license. "I don't suppose it's my name any more."

"Are you all right?"

Larry felt tears stinging his eyes. It seemed so easy to cry now. Natural. "I don't know anymore."

"What is it? Tell me."

Larry sighed, leaning against the door of the truck heavily. "Do you remember the dance routine we did to 'Like a Virgin' when we were in the Middleview kick line together?"

"Of course I do. We practiced it for hours in my mom's backyard."

"Funny," Larry said. "Considering that we didn't meet until our junior year in college."

Susan covered her mouth. "Oh, my God."

"I know, now," Larry said flatly. "I made a wish, and it came true."

"Made a wish? What are you talking about?"

"In the morgue, after we heard about Dawn. I held you in my arms, and I wished I could give you back your best friend. That I could actually be your best friend. I should have been more

careful what I wished for. I have all these memories now, of you and I growing up together. And now you have them too."

Susan took his - her? - hand in hers gently, chafing the palm with her other hand. "I didn't know you wished for that."

"I love you," Larry whispered.

"And I love you, too," Susan said. "I don't tell you enough."

Larry mustered a weak smile. "You do fine."

Susan gave him an unreadable look. "Are you okay now?"

Larry shrugged. "I don't know anymore. I just wish I knew what the hell was going to happen next."

"Oh, Larry," Susan said, gathering him into her arms. It was softness meeting softness. It felt strange to Larry, feeling his breasts fit between hers as they pulled one another close.

"Lori," Lori corrected.

"Are you sure?" Susan prompted.

Lori wiped tears from her blue eyes with a long-nailed fingers. "I can't fight this, Suse. And I don't think I want to. You mean so much to me. You can find another lover. There are men all over this city who'd give anything to have the chance to be with you. But best friends are hard to come by. I think I like this better."

Susan gave him that unreadable look again.

"What is it?" Lori asked.

"Nothing," she replied, looking away. "Ask me later, okay?"

\* \* \*

They'd managed pretty well getting Dawn's old apartment cleared out. The precious things, the keepsakes, were boxed up separately from the furniture, clothes and sundries, for Dawn's family. Susan kept a couple small things to remind her of her friend, but there was no pain in her eyes as she went about their tasks. Perhaps the distance between herself and Dawn's memory was widening. Or maybe Lori was managing to fill that hole.

They dropped the truck off at Dawn's mother's house, where her family had gathered for their last goodbyes to their missing daughter or sister. They all addressed Larry as 'Lori.' They all remembered him as Lori, the little tow-headed blonde girl who'd been an equal partner in crime with Dawn and Susan growing up. Dawn's brother, Eddie, even went so far as to ask her out for a drink sometime, which Lori politely declined.

They got a lift back to the rental place and picked up the car. Susan drove - Lori's muscles ached from the strain. She kept forgetting that she couldn't lift 100 pound boxes anymore, and was painfully reminded when she tried. She lazed in the front seat of the Jeep Wrangler, rubbing her shoulders, when a sharp tug in her middle flung her eyes open wide.

"Oh, God," she said.

"What is it?" Susan asked.

"My. I think."

"What?" Susan demanded, looking at her in alarm.

"I think it's finished," Lori said, putting a hand to her crotch. She felt nothing but a yielding softness where she never expected to feel anything of the sort before. Little curling tingles spread away from her touch.

"You mean."

Lori nodded. "It's done."

She grunted. "And this bra is cutting me in half. I think my tits got bigger." She fished her hands around her back and beneath her shirt instinctually, as if she'd done it all her life. The clasps were easy, even with her long fingernails. It was as if someone had let a vice off of her chest. The mounds beneath her shirt sprang up and out a little, finally tenting into two lovely and all-too-perfect 36D masterpieces capped with prominent nipples that poked teasingly through the front of the little baby tee. They were perky and a little too firm, which jelled completely with Lori's new memories of getting saline implants shortly after college.

"Are you okay?" Susan asked, her look a mixture of worry and expectation.

"I'm okay," Lori said. "I'm better than okay. I'm... I don't know. I'm complete."

Susan stroked Lori's cheek tenderly. "I'm glad. I really am."

"Are you going to miss the old me?" Lori asked in a small voice.

"Every single day," Susan said. "I promise."

"At least we're friends," Lori consoled herself.

"Well," Susan said, "at the very least that."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how before, I told you to ask me later about having any man I wanted?"

"Sure," Lori said, her voice cracking suddenly, coming to rest in its new range of a lovely, husky mezzo.

"I don't want any man," Susan said, looking down at her hands. "I want you."

"What do you mean?" Lori asked.

"Lori, Dawn and I were lovers," Susan said. "We were going to break it off once you and I were married, we didn't think that our marriage would be able to stand the strain of it. I loved her, in her own way, as much as I love you."

"Wow," Lori breathed, crestfallen. "Thanks for telling me."

"That's just it," Susan said. "I've always been attracted to women. Always. I thought Dawn was the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I understand," Lori said, feeling her heart break.

"Until I met you," Susan concluded, lacing her slender fingers through Lori's. "Lori, I think I'm in love with you."

"And I've never been out of love with you," Lori said. "But what does this mean?"

"It means we'll get weird looks from rednecks and occasionally someone will call you or me a dyke," Susan said. "But it also means we'll be together. And that's all I care about."

Lori smiled. "That's all there is to care about," she said, leaning into her lover for their first kiss.