

BOARDWALK

By Vic Grant



ILLUSTRATED BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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BOARDWALK

By Vic Grant

**Have you been half asleep,
and have you heard voices?
I've heard them calling my name.**

... Kermit the frog

CHAPTER ONE: To Catch A Rapist

It was the first week in March, and I was driving Kim's Rabbit (I think they call them "Cabriolets" now, but to me they 're still Rabbits). She'd been doing some shopping and I was going down to pick her up for lunch. It was Sunday, the sun was shining, the top was down, and the radio was tuned to some station Kim listened to. My mind began to wander. When did it all begin? God, it had to be, what, a year and a half, two years maybe?

My name's Joe Stagnaro and I'm 37 years old. I went to school at UC Santa Cruz but dropped out in my junior year. After some screwing around, I joined SCPD as a beat cop. It took me six years to make my way to the rank of Inspector. They call it "plain clothes" work. Once, the clothes weren't so plain, but I'll get to that later.

This is mainly about a guy who worked in the Bureau of Inspectors with me, Rene Malotte.

We all called him "Frenchie" and that drove him nuts, which is probably why we did it. Cops like ragging on each other better than almost anything else. But don't get me wrong. We may give each other a hard time but you won't find a better friend than a fellow officer. Hell, your partner is ready to lay his life on the line for you, and a four-o-six (officer needs assistance) gets everybody's attention real quick.

I always get a kick out of Hollywood's concept of police work. You know, high-speed chases and lots of shooting. Everybody's good looking, there's never a dull moment, and, of course, the good guys win. In my department, any cop caught racing through town at eighty MPH, would be up on charges so fast his head would spin, and in my fourteen years on the Santa Cruz PD, the few times I've had my piece out of its holster

during an incident I was scared as hell, I guarantee. Being a cop is a frustrating, dirty job and I love it.

Santa Cruz

Compared to the upscale, yuppie beach communities of Southern California, Santa Cruz is pretty slow-paced. We've got the only remaining oceanfront amusement park in the state, and there's a carousel with one of those calliope things in the center. Families go there on Sunday afternoons for the rides and games and, when the fog is out, a lot of them picnic on the adjoining beach. There's a pier about six-hundred yards north where people fish for sand dabs and perch. A big yellow cat everybody calls Garfield hangs out there and gets fat on bait and fish guts.

There isn't a lot of serious crime in Santa Cruz; mostly four-fifteens (the catchall for disturbances) and what we call the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" - drugs, auto boosting, pandering, and petty theft.

The SCPD has about thirty-five uniformed officers working three shifts, fifteen or so in administration and dispatch, and five of us in the Bureau of Inspectors.

We all know one other pretty well and socialize a lot. There are Halloween, Christmas, and Superbowl parties, and on the Fourth of July, we throw a barbecue down at the beach. Those with families bring them along and there's plenty of beer and food. During the day there are games, and at night, bumper-car rides, a beauty contest, and fireworks. It's a ball.

Mike Leahy is the Chief of Inspectors and a cop's cop. He served in the 101st Airborne in 'Nam and, like just about everyone I've ever met who's been in that hell hole, never talks much about it. After leaving the service, he joined the SCPD and worked his way up through the ranks. He's tough, but fair, and he'd walk on coals for his guys. In spite of his hardheaded approach to police work, he's progressive, and takes every opportunity to extend our knowledge of investigative techniques, sending us to seminars and exchange programs with other jurisdictions, as case load and budget permit.

An officer I replaced, Jim Roderick, was recruited by the San Francisco field office of the FBI. While many guys might be upset over the FBI stealing one of their best, Mike was proud as punch, which was absolutely typical of that big Irish man.

In the Spring of 1988, there were four inspectors working under Mike: myself, Pat Logan, Cliff James, and Rene Malotte.

Pat was the youngest in the group at 32. He was born and raised in San Francisco, and was on the SFPD for a couple of years before coming here. Pat's a joker; he can say just about anything and get away with it. He's married with two kids.

Cliff James had been around the longest. He joined the force in the early seventies. He and Mike had been buddies in the army. Having been an MP I guess he just naturally gravitated to police work so, when Mike joined up with SCPD, Cliff wasn't far behind. He'd do anything for Mike.

We all would.

Rene, a French-Canadian, was born in 1955 in some little village outside Montreal. Although his family moved from Canada when he was just a kid, he never lost all of his accent, and his family still speak French together. His sister Marie, just about his age give or take, is married and lives in Palo Alto. She works for one of the high-tech firms over there. His folks live over that way too.

Rene attended UCSC the same time I did, but he hung in and graduated with a degree in law enforcement. Although I didn't know him real well, I'd run into him occasionally at a party or in one of my classes. My impression had always been that he was a nice guy, but a little on the quiet side. He had friends but none you could really call close.

Some people seem to go through life easier than others. Rene was one of those lucky people who fit into the former category. I don't think he had an enemy in the world. After being promoted into inspectors, he kept up with people he knew from when he'd worked patrol, making it a point to stop by and visit shop owners and others from the old days. On occasion, somebody would call to ask if he'd talk to a teenage son or daughter who was on the wrong track. I never knew Rene to refuse such a request. He was that kind of guy.

In my line of work, you don't always see people at their best. Those involved in an incident - victims and witnesses as well as suspects - are often excited and not thinking straight. You walk on eggshells. If you don't handle things right, somebody can get hurt.

This is particularly true when you're fresh on a scene where something bad has just gone down. Cops are trained to stay cool under these conditions, and some do it better than others, but I've never seen anybody better at it than Rene. He had a real knack for talking people down, you know, making them relax. He could usually do whatever needed to be done just with words. In the five plus years I worked with him, I only saw him resort to physical force once.

An example of this innate ability of his occurred last summer. We'd just done an FI (field interrogation) when we heard Lucy Sanchez - one of our dispatchers - calling any unit in the vicinity to respond to a nine-eighteen at the boardwalk. There was a teenage girl standing out on a ledge of the casino building, screaming and threatening to jump. We were just a block away when we heard the call and advised Lucy that we were en route.

Rene and I were the first on the scene. It wasn't hard to find the girl as there was a crowd gathered below where she was standing. I held the crowd back while Rene went up into the building.

The girl was loony tunes - screaming at the top of her lungs and making no sense.

I saw Rene stick his head out of a window about fifteen feet from where she was standing. He said something to her and she turned and yelled at him to stay away. He kept talking to her, but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

You could see her starting to calm down as he spoke. Within ten minutes, she walked over to the window where he was and climbed in.

By that time, two patrol units were on the scene and Rene turned the girl over to one of them.

The Decoy Program

Like I said, things are pretty quiet in Santa Cruz. Nevertheless, we still get a few homicides, robberies, and rapes - stuff we call "Part-1 Crimes" (because they are reported by local law enforcement organizations in Part I of the FBI's Uniform Crime Report).

In the Spring of 1988, there was a series of rapes in the beach area. These were particularly bad because they involved physical injury in addition to rape. The MO was consistent. The victim was always an attractive girl or woman, walking alone at night in the vicinity of the boardwalk. This guy would come up from behind and whack her in the back, inevitably knocking her down. He'd then beat her up and rape her. He wore a stocking mask. Between that and the fact he operated in the dark, we never got a decent description.

By June, there had been three incidents involving this jerk. We'd posted black and whites, unmarked vehicles, and foot patrols in the area, but he was too smart to attack when anyone was around. Our local paper started to turn up the heat after the third incident, and the Mayor had a special meeting with the Chief of SCPD, Phil Edwards and my boss, Mike Leahy.

Mike came back from that meeting more upset than I'd ever seen him. He called Rene and I into his office and said that we were to make this number one priority, advising us he was setting up a decoy program in which we'd dress as women and hang out down by the boardwalk.

Rene stood 5'11" and, at the time, weighed about 175 lb.. I'm 5'10" and had a couple of pounds on him. We were going to be big ladies, but Pat's at least my size and Cliff is all of 6'4" and must weigh 250, so Rene and I were about the only game in town.

I don't know why they didn't use one or two of the female patrol officers. They would have been more convincing bait, that's for sure (at least at the outset). But, Mike insisted on carrying the ball. I don't know, maybe he just wanted his guys to crack it or maybe he felt we'd be better able to handle the situation if things got rough. In retrospect, it would have been better all the way around if they had used lady cops, but you never know how things are going to turn out.

To say Rene wasn't too hot for the idea would be putting it mildly. Now, most guys don't exactly relish the idea of putting on a dress, but this was just a part of the job and everybody knew it. Still, Rene got real uptight about the whole thing at first. To me, it was just another assignment. The fact that I was taking it in my stride calmed Rene down. That's how it is with partners.

I'll never forget the first time we came in dressed up.

Rene was wearing a black sweater and dark-colored skirt. I had on a white sweater with tight-fitting, red slacks. We both had on blonde wigs, and had stuffed the largest bras we could find.

It must've been quite a sight, 'cause you should've heard the howls when we showed up dressed for action. Of course, we camped it up good, swinging our hips and generally being outrageous.

Rene was really enjoying himself. Usually he was pretty reserved but dressed up, he was a howl. I remember being relieved that he'd finally reconciled himself so well to the situation.

We worked the beach front in pre-established patterns. Rene would walk up the beach while I did the pier. We communicated on hand-held units when we were sure we were alone. We saw a few suspicious types, but we were never approached - for any reason. This went on for three or four weeks during which two more rapes occurred.

At this point, Mike added Pat to the detail. I guess he thought our problem was insufficient coverage. Pat didn't do any better than Rene and me.

You could say the decoy program was a flop, but that would be a gift. We were all pretty upset about the situation. We wanted to nail this guy so bad we could taste it. I don't think we'd have ever had a snowball's chance if it hadn't been for Yvonne Green.

Vonnie

I wasn't real clear as to how she got involved. Lucy Sanchez, (the dispatcher I mentioned earlier and a kick in the pants), said that Vonnie knew the Chief's wife.

In any case, it was a Tuesday in early August at the beginning of the night shift when Mike called us into the conference room.

The slide projector we use from time to time was set up on one end of the battered and burned oak table which dominated the center of the room.

We were dolled up and giving each other the usual crap when Mike came in and introduced Yvonne Green to each of us. She was in her mid to late 30s, dark hair pulled back in a bun, about 5'6", and 115 to 120 lb.. Good looking lady, but serious.

As usual, Mike didn't mince words.



“Dr. Green is an expert in the area of gender ...” he looked at Yvonne Green with a helpless expression.

She came in right on cue: “gender dynamics”. She said it as if everyone of course knew exactly what that meant. It sounded like the name of a corporation to me.

Mike resumed. “Yeah, gender dynamics. Anyhow, I've asked Dr. Green to take charge of you monkeys and help us make this decoy program work. You're to do exactly what she tells you. I mean to the letter. Anybody got a problem with that?”

Now, if any of us had piped up at that point, his ass would've been grass, so of course we just sat and kept quiet.

After introducing us, the Chief turned to Vonnie and said, “They're all yours. If anybody gives you a hard time, let me know.”

Vonnie smiled and replied, “I'm sure we're going to get along just fine, Mike. Thanks for everything.”

At that point, Mike turned and walked out without saying another word.

Vonnie looked at each of us in turn, and we sat there waiting for her to do something. It was her show.

Finally, she opened up.

“You guys couldn't fool anybody. Look at you. Do you think the padding and those long wigs make you look like ladies?”

We all just sat there looking at one another. We knew we didn't look like chicks, but I guess we figured if it was dark enough ...

Before anyone could respond to her rhetorical question, she resumed.

“I want to show you some pictures. Rene, would you catch the lights?”

She switched on the slide projector and a picture came up on the screen which had been set up at the north end of the room.

It was a full-body shot of a nice-looking chick in her twenties. She was an elf - real cute. Slim build with not much on top and small hips. She wore her dark brown hair short, and had on jeans and a tee shirt, and very light makeup. She had a smile that melted hearts.

Vonnie left the slide on for about five seconds and then moved on to the next one.

Another full-body. This time, a lady in her thirties who had “mother” written all over her. She was pretty with shoulder-length, brown hair and an average build.

The chick in the third slide was bald as a billiard, and thin. Three gold studs in each ear plus one in the nose. She had a soft look about her, in spite of the bizarre get-up. We run into kids like that all the time, especially down at the boardwalk. They're often into drugs and will hook, steal, or whatever to get enough bread for a fix.

There were about twenty or so slides; all gals. Some good looking, others not so; three black, one oriental, the rest white, and the full spectrum of sizes and shapes.

None of us could figure out what her point was. When the last slide was shown, a cute kid in her late teens with a pony tail and freckles, wearing a man's white dress shirt tucked into a pair of khaki shorts, Vonnie again asked Rene to hit the lights.

She addressed the group

“Okay boys, what did we just see?”

At this point, we're all straining to keep a straight face.

Then Rene pipes up, “A series of slides showing females ranging in age from about 17 to 40.”

“Very good.” Vonnie smiles back, like a third-grade teacher. I could tell this was going to be a long night. She went on. “Is there any question in your minds that what we all saw were women?”

“No ma'am, none whatsoever.” I responded.

Rene grinned and Pat started coughing to cover a laugh.

“That's nice,” she continued, “because numbers 1, 2, 5, and the last one, number 22, are guys.”

Whoops! Good going. Here we were, three veteran cops who'd seen it all and she'd conned us like we were kids. We just looked at her, deadpan, trying not to show our embarrassment.

“Welcome to Gender Orientation 1A.” she announced. She had our attention, and began her pitch.

“Let's start with some concepts. First of all, those are all ladies, but they aren't all women. They're all feminine, but not all female. Gender vs sex. Anybody here know the difference?”

Pat responded, “Yeah, gender is something used in language and sex is what makes the world go 'round.”

Rene and I laughed.

Vonnie smiled politely and shot back, “In your dreams! Gender is what we see. You guys saw ladies. You weren't wrong, you just used the wrong word to describe them. You agreed they were all women, but they're not. Sex is in the crotch; gender is everywhere else. The two usually go together, but not always. Numbers 1, 2, 5, and 22 may be guys, but they are also among the most feminine persons in that set of slides. Let's take another look at number 1. Rene?”

Rene switched off the light and the elf reappeared on the screen.

“The person you're looking at has short hair and the figure of a boy, and you made her as a woman! Why?”

Absolute silence. We were all feeling more than a little confused. God, even now, knowing it was a guy, I couldn't get it into my head. It was the same for Pat and Rene. The worst part was, even looking at the damn picture, I couldn't say why I took her for a girl! I was even thinking in terms of “she” and “her”. This was the pits!

Finally, Rene volunteered, "I think it's her smile; she smiles as a girl. Guys don't smile like that."

Vonnie had a sarcastic look on her face as she addressed us.

"Do you mean that here's a guy - not much of a figure, no dress, a touch of make up - and by just smiling he's more of a lady than the three of you put together with your outlandish loud skirts, 3-inch heels, and 44-Cs bulging with more stuffing than a Thanksgiving turkey?"

Pat shrugged.

We were in way over our heads, and didn't really understand all this stuff. We had our ideas of what separated guys from chicks, and she was demolishing them one by one.

Once again, she had Rene turn on the lights as she shut off the projector and the elf vanished from the room, if not from our minds. Vonnie spoke.

"If you don't learn another thing from our little association, learn this: Being feminine has absolutely nothing to do with what you're wearing, the length of your hair, or your bust line. It's totally, one-hundred percent in your head. It's just that simple and it's just that complicated. If you want to make this decoy thing work, you've got to learn how to feel feminine - from the inside out. By the time I'm through with you, all of you will be able to pass anytime and any place. You'll also discover a whole new side to life."

Pat shivered visibly, but Vonnie paid no attention, continuing her pitch.

"This may be the most interesting, insightful, and frightening experience you will ever go through. If you don't think you can handle it, just say so and you're out.

"I've taken the liberty of making appointments for you with Martin Fineman, the Department physician. The slots are tomorrow at 10 AM, 3 PM, and 4 PM; you decide who goes when. You'll have a simple physical including a blood test.

"We'll meet for two hours every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening at 7 PM. I guess you guys call it 1900 hours. Tomorrow night, I want to see you clean and dressed in jeans and tee shirts. Good night ladies."

Day One

Wednesday, I checked in day watch at 8:15 and did some paper work, the only thing about being a cop I don't like.

I'd gotten the 10 AM appointment, so about 9:40 I left for Dr. Fineman's office, which is only about 10 minutes away.

I was a little early, and the receptionist had me take a seat. I've got this theory that doctors make it a practice never to see a patient on time, just so you don't forget who's boss. Sure enough, I'd almost finished an article on how some British rock group trashed its way through half the luxury hotels on the French Riviera, when the receptionist cooed that the Doctor was ready to see me. It was 10:16.

The exam was the typical routine, sticking fingers and needles into various parts of my anatomy as I shivered in an examining room whose sterility was relieved only by

three crayon pictures of circus clowns done by someone who didn't get paid for his work - one of the good doctor's kids, I surmised.

Dr. Fineman advised me that I was fine, which I already knew. He then told me to dress and meet him in his office, one door down.

When I came into his office, he motioned me to sit down in one of two worn, leather chairs which stood in front of an old fashioned oak desk. He then proceeded to ask me a lot of questions about how I liked my job, etc., etc., etc.

Generally, we take a physical once a year; everybody's got his own schedule. Mine shouldn't have been for another seven months. Why were they giving us all physicals now? One thing I learned when I was a rookie is not to ask questions and not to volunteer. I kept my questions to myself.

I got back to the office after a quick bite at the local Taco Bell.

Rene was at his desk. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Didn't even hurt. You know, the usual stuff," I grunted. "Did you get any more details on that two-eleven at Fred's Liquors?"

Rene and I were investigating an armed robbery that had gone down two nights before.

Rene waved a piece of paper.

"Jack Simone found this auto parts receipt in the parking lot about where the suspect's car had been. It's probably nothing, but I guess we ought to check it out."

"Whaddya think of Vonnie?" I asked.

"Seems to know her stuff." he replied. "I'm still trying to accept that those are guys we saw."

Pat looked up from his desk and imparted a typical bit of insight. "I know what you mean. How'd you like to take an elf like number-one home from a party and find out the hard way?"

Rene gave a shudder. "Scares the hell out of me," he said with a look of sheer terror.

Pat laughed and went back to his work.

I don't recall much about the rest of the day. Usual garbage. We probably went to the auto parts store to check on the invoice.

In any case, Rene, Pat, and I just had time for some enchiladas before our 1900 meeting with Vonnie. It was kind of refreshing not to be in drag at that time of the evening for a change.

Per Vonnie's request, we were all wearing jeans and tee shirts. Actually, Pat was wearing a baseball jersey. I guess it was his way of asserting his independence. We ambled into the conference room at about five minutes of.

Vonnie was already there.

She began by asking us if we'd had time to think about the previous night's discussion.

I'd thought about it, but I wasn't about to tell her. I figured it was the same for the other two, and then Rene started spilling his guts about how it had caught him un-awares and how he'd lost some sleep trying to get it all straight in his mind.

She asked us what we'd learned and again, it was Rene who did the talking.

I guess his enthusiasm got to Pat and me, and we started opening up too.

She asked us how we felt about being cops - what motivated us. She focused on the risk-taking aspect of the job. Why were we willing to lay down our lives? She also got into how cops are kind of isolated from the rest of society, and how we felt about that. Things loosened up. She didn't seem so preoccupied with the "gender" stuff, but instead spent more time on police work.

We broke to get some coffee and then reconvened.

Once we'd all sat down again, she changed gears.

"What did you think of that cute little flowered print Lucy was wearing today?"

Total silence!

"No opinions?" she urged.

Again quiet prevailed. What did she expect? What did we care for some dress Lucy had on.

"All right," she continued, "did anyone even notice what Lucy was wearing?"

A chorus of No's resounded.

"Why not?" she asked.

I was getting tired of the game so I gave her an answer I thought so obvious that it didn't really need to be stated.

"Who remembers stuff like that?" I shot back, in a tone of voice that no doubt betrayed my growing irritation.

"You guys are trained observers. When there's a crime, you're often called into court to render testimony relative to details that most people couldn't recall if their lives depended on it. And yet, when I ask you a simple question about the attire of one of your fellow employees - one who's attractive, well liked, and whom you practically trip over as you make your morning pilgrimage from the slum you call 'the bull pen' to the coffee machine and back again - you all of a sudden lose your keen powers of observation and come up empty as a beer keg after a fraternity party. Why?"

She was looking straight at me so I responded.

"Hell, no guy notices stuff like that. I mean, what difference does it make?"

"What difference does it make as to who won the Forty-Niners game last Sunday, if they even played? Whether it's consequential isn't the issue. You were getting warm when you said something about *No guy* noticing that sort of thing. What you meant to say was *No real guy*, right? I'll bet you all noticed exactly what she was wearing, right down to the pattern and cut, and then proceeded to push it out of your conscious minds. Is your masculinity so fragile that it would be jeopardized by saying something nice to Lucy about her dress?"

“Hell yes!” I retorted to the appreciative and relieved laughter of the other two.

“Look,” she said with a look of genuine compassion, “the Chief told me about the decoy program, and how it's been pretty much a fiasco. You're good cops; the reason I'm here is to help you be more effective in your roles. That's what this is all about. Last night I told you that this would be interesting, insightful, and frightening. It'll also be maybe the toughest thing you've ever had to do. I expect total dedication. It's going to be hard work.”

Then, she made some points about how we'd always seen things from just the male perspective. As guys, we didn't know how women really felt about things. She was good.

I don't know whether it was her personality or what, but the three of us lapped it up like a kitten does milk.

She told us this would be a kind of “boot camp”, and began with the first drill. She wanted all of us to go to a department store the next day and buy a half-dozen pairs of women's underpants. We were also to buy a copy of Vogue magazine at a drug store.

I don't know why, but the idea of having to buy the panties and magazine really got to me. I didn't mind hamming it up in front of the guys, but this was different. For one thing, we had to do it solo - nobody there to share the laughs. We were also confronting a stranger in a situation which would cause our masculinity to be questioned. If this was the first assignment, what would the rest be like? I was starting to not like this.

The two hours went real fast and Vonnie wound up saying that the next meeting, Friday, would be at her house.

I never got there.

The next day, Mike called me into his office and advised me that there was an opening in the special FBI course at Quantico Virginia. It was mine if I wanted it. Now, this is the stuff that a cop's dreams are made of. There's only a handful of guys that get this opportunity. Of course I wanted it!

I was to clean up my paperwork and hand my files over to Vick Corso, a new guy who was going to fill in for me. I was scheduled to go back east in a couple of weeks. There was a lot of stuff, both job-related and personal, to do before then.

CHAPTER TWO: Going Away

I gotta admit that I was relieved at being pulled off the “swish patrol”, as it had come to be called by our fellow officers. Although kinda fun at first, it was now starting to make me feel real uneasy. Rene and Pat were happy for me when I told them. I was sure that they would have given anything to be in my place but I was the logical choice, being single and all.

The program was actually several different courses, extending over a number of months. There were breaks during which I'd come back for a week or so before having to resume my studies. I'd be covering mainly specialty areas - NCIC access, forensics, fingerprint identification, cross jurisdictional inquiries, and so on.

The next two and a half weeks flew by like magnum rounds in a vacuum.

Before I knew it, it was my last day.

The guys had put together a little surprise party for me.

Rene conned me into going to Armand's Grotto, a nice restaurant-bar on the pier, for a couple of drinks. When I got there, he led me into one of those private rooms where it seemed half the department had assembled. They were wearing dumb grins and funny hats. I gotta admit I was touched. We joked and drank mostly.

Pat started calling me "Holmes", and it stuck for the rest of the night. Guys would ask me if I planned to take up the violin, stuff like that. What a bunch of jokers!

After the whole thing was over, Rene and I walked out to his car. I was feeling no pain, but Rene, knowing he'd be driving, stayed sober as a judge.

As he drove me back, I asked him how the "program" was going. He said that at first it had been real tough. When buying the panties, he'd told the sales girl they were for his wife. She'd cracked something about how she figured they weren't for him, but Rene said she gave him a funny look while she said it - made him wish he were somewhere else.

When they met next, Vonnie drew them out on how they felt about the experience. Rene said she told them that they were beginning to understand gender-based vulnerability. She was big on 25-cent words. She pushed the point, saying that women had feelings similar to that all the time. She also said that they would get used to such experiences. They had also become comfortable discussing fashion (both men's and women's), but more significantly, Rene felt, they were opening up about their feelings on just about everything from the program to events in their personal lives.

I was starting to feel guilty. Here I was being sent to the FBI training course while Rene and Pat were stuck in the swish patrol getting humiliated.

"Hey, Frenchie. Why don't you and Pat just go to Mike and explain the situation to him? I'm sure if he knew what you were going through, he'd let you guys off the hook," I suggested.

Then Rene gave me answer I wasn't expecting.

"You know Joe, two weeks ago I would have agreed with you. I mean, I don't think I've ever been through anything so tough since I was a kid."

I wondered what had been so tough when he was a kid.

He went on.

"It's funny, but I'm really learning a lot out of this. There's this whole world we don't even see. It's like another dimension. I remember seeing *The Wizard of Oz* when I was small. It began in black and white. You didn't really notice it much until Dorothy landed in Oz and suddenly everything was in color. This is similar to that occasion. I'm finding out things about myself I didn't even know existed. And there have been more things like the first assignment, such as having our hair and nails done."

He showed me his fingernails at that point, holding them out straight like a chick. They were a little on the long side, and very shiny. I guess they'd been polished.

I objected that guys had their hair and nails done these days - no big deal (although I'd never be caught dead in a beauty parlor).

He said that this time, he'd felt more natural dealing with the incident (I guess he couldn't very well say he was doing it for his wife), and that he actually enjoyed sitting there being fussed over and talking with the beautician. Then he said: "I'm taking estrogen."

That's where my eyebrows went up.

"Estrogen?" I asked. "That's female hormones. Does Mike know about this?"

Rene replied, "It was optional. Vonnie assured me that the only effect it will have in the dosages I'm taking will be to heighten my sensitivity."

I stared obviously at his chest.

"Well, doesn't look like it's done any serious damage."

Rene laughed.

"Annette calls the pills Easter eggs, because they're purple and oval shaped. I take one when I get up every morning." Annette was Rene's wife, and a dish and a half by any man's standards.

"Have you noticed any difference?" I queried.

"No," he responded, "but Vonnie says I won't for another month or two. Pat's kind of upset about it all. I guess he doesn't see it the same way I do. I think he may not stick with the program."

"If Pat does quit, I guess you'll cash it in too, huh?"

"I think I'll stay with it." he stated simply.

"Whatever." I sighed. I must admit that I found it a little hard to relate to Rene's reaction to the whole thing. In any event, I soon put all that out of my mind.

The next morning I was sitting in a 1011 on my way back east. I didn't see Rene again for a couple of months.

Invitation

It was early November by the time I got back; I was to return to Quantico in two weeks, and was kind of a celebrity in the department. Everybody asked a lot of questions and, of course, I took a lot of ribbing.

Everything was just about as I'd left it - everything except Rene.

I saw him at his desk the morning I came in and could sense something had changed, although I wasn't sure what it was. It was one of those things you couldn't quite put your finger on. I didn't give it much thought until he asked me if I'd like to stop off for a couple of beers after the shift. When had I ever refused a beer?

We drove out to Armand's where they'd thrown the farewell bash. At first, we talked about the usual stuff.

Then I noticed that Rene seemed uneasy. I figured he had something on his mind and that he'd open up when he felt like it. I was right.

Just after the first beer, he brought up the decoy program. He was still on it, except now he was alone. Pat had put through a request for reassignment to regular case work, and his request had been approved. The rapist had inexplicably stopped doing what he did so well and Rene was on the detail all by himself now. I guess Mike decided to hang in with program anyhow.

Then Rene told me that he was feeling strange.

I asked him what he meant.

He got a funny expression on his face, and said that the program was changing his life.

I thought he was joking, and I kidded him back - something like, "Any change would be for the better."

He seemed hurt that I was making light of it, and told me that Vonnie's immersion program had intensified.

She had him wearing lingerie under his jeans now, and was spending more time discussing women's fashions and how he felt about things. She was even teaching him how to walk differently.

His voice was soft as he continued.

"I'm seeing things from a new point of view and it's beginning to scare me."

He had piqued my curiosity.

"How do you mean, `new'?" I asked.

Rene looked me in the eyes. "You won't laugh?"

"Not unless you say something funny."

"I'm - how can I say it - feeling more intensely about things. The other day for example, I cried just because I heard a sad song on the radio. It was a silly song, actually - something about rainbows, sung by a frog. I don't know why it made me sad, but it did. Damn frog! Annette found it very touching. Also, my sex drive seems to be diminishing."

My response was simple.

"Hell, Frenchie, drop it! Like I told you before, Mike will let you out. Nobody expects you to go through all that."

He looked at me funny.

"That's the problem, Joe, I don't want to quit. I'm starting to really feel good about myself. I can't explain it, but these pills seem to be affecting my soul."

Here, he put his hand on his chest. Rene was always verbal and often used hand motions to give emphasis to what he said. Must've been his French upbringing.

This is where I screwed up in a major way. Here's my partner, baring his soul to me, and almost begging for a firm hand. I should've grabbed him by the shoulders, shook the hell out of him, and told him to get real and bail out of the detail, but instead, I made light of it. I told him as long as he felt okay, he should relax and enjoy it.

How was I supposed to know what was coming?

Rene looked thoughtful as he nibbled on a pretzel.

“Joe, inasmuch as you're in town for a while, why don't you sit in on our next session Wednesday night?”

Attending another of Vonnie's `sensitivity sessions' was right up there with writing supplemental incident reports and dumping the garbage on my personal list of favorite things. Unfortunately, I let three too many milliseconds elapse before coming up with a reasonable excuse for rejecting his proposal.

“Great! You'll come then.” Rene exclaimed as his face lit up like that of a kid on Christmas.

Jenny's Story

Rene picked me up Wednesday night and we drove to Vonnie's house.

It was a big, Tudor-style place. Broad, dark wood beams faced a white stucco exterior. The windows were comprised of diamond-shaped panes, and there was what looked to me like a small tower attached to the house, just to the right of the entrance. A wide expanse of lawn was bisected by a flagstone walk leading to a massive front door. The grass area must've been at least 6,000 square feet and probably required a tractor to cut, it was that big.

The gender business must be good, I thought to myself.

Vonnie met us at the door. If she was surprised to see me, she didn't let on.

“Nice to see you again, Joe.” she gushed. I felt like a kid who'd ditched class and was confronting his teacher on his first day back.

“I'm just here for the ride.” I explained. “I never got a chance to fill you in, but I got reassigned to an FBI ...”

Vonnie cut me off in mid-sentence, taking my arm and giving me a mock accusing pout.

“I understand Joe. You'd rather be shooting at dummies than learning something new about yourself.”

I was starting to feel guilty when I caught myself and realized that she was just pulling my leg.

She led us through the entry hall by a broad staircase, which ascended in a gentle curve past several portraits to a balconied landing on the floor above.

As we walked down the long hallway, our footsteps echoing on an elaborate parquet floor, I was half surprised not to see a suit of armor along the way. I felt some satisfaction, however, as I caught sight of a pair of crossed swords mounted above a bow-front, cherry wood secretary.

Vonnie showed us into a wood-paneled study lit by three or four really big logs crackling in a walk-in sized fireplace across the room. The fire cast weird shadows on the wall, further contributing to the eeriness of the setting. She invited us to sit down. There were several plush wing chairs and two love seats to choose from.

Walking past a pair of French doors which gave onto a small garden, Vonnie set some small, pewter goblets on the marble bar top and asked perfunctorily if we'd mind a little brandy.

Neither of us objected. I was starting to feel a little less bad about having come.

After we'd all taken a couple of sips of the smooth and obviously-expensive stuff, Vonnie spoke.

“Tonight I have a special treat. Do you remember the young person with the pony-tail and shorts from our slides?”

We nodded; she was referring to number 22, the teenager.

“Well, I've arranged for her to spend some time with us this evening. Her name's Jennifer, but she prefers to be called Jenny. She's going to tell us her special story and you may feel free to ask questions. She's just nineteen and, despite her enthusiasm, is somewhat shy so I know you'll be gentle and understanding.”

Vonnie glanced at a pendulum clock suspended on the wall facing the fireplace. It showed 8:12. Vonnie looked a little distraught. “She was due here at eight; I hope she didn't decide not to come.”

We sat sipping the excellent amber liquid and watching the fire. Rene got up to examine the contents of a built-in, floor-to-ceiling bookcase which filled an entire wall. The whole thing was out of one of those forties movies. I wouldn't have been surprised if Claude Raines had entered the room in a silk smoking jacket and offered us cigars.

My fantasy was interrupted as the pendulum clock sounded a fragment of the Westminster chime announcing the quarter-hour and, in simultaneous and conspiratorial cacophony, the door bell proclaimed the arrival of another guest.

Vonnie got up.

“That must be Jenny.” she asserted, striding purposely out of the room.

I looked over at Rene, who was flipping through some leather-bound novel.

Presently, Vonnie returned with the cute kid from the slide show in tow.

It was unnerving to see her in person. She was a really pretty, teenage kid - the kind you'd see jumping and leading cheers at a football game. I toyed with the idea that this was all some kind of elaborate scam and that Jenny really was a girl. She was about 5'9", and had a nicer figure than what showed in the slide. This time, she had her hair hanging loose and was wearing a beige cashmere sweater and brown skirt. A simple heart pendant hung from a gold chain around her neck.

After introducing Jenny to us, Vonnie motioned Rene and me to sit down.

“Jenny, Joe and Rene are with the Santa Cruz police department and are trying to apprehend the man who's been raping women down by the beach. I've been working with Rene to help him be more convincing as a decoy. The success of the program depends on how well Rene can do this. I felt that you might help in that regard by sharing with us some of your experiences. You will be of special assistance because you can convey things to Rene that I can't. I know that Rene and Joe are very appreciative

of your help and will empathize with your feelings. Why don't you just tell us your story however you'd like. Just relax; we're all friends.”

I should say here that the following quotes are verbatim, as Vonnie records all her sessions and was kind enough to let me borrow the tapes from that evening for transcription. There's no way I could have remembered Jenny's whole story on my own.

Jenny was seated on one side of a love seat. The flickering glow of the fire played off her wide, dark-lashed eyes. She began somewhat nervously.

“Well, my name's Jenny Phillips.” She giggled self-consciously, realizing the redundancy of reintroducing herself. “I was born on November 17, 1971 in Los Angeles. I went to school at ...”

I guess because we were cops, Jenny was giving us a formal, objective, and almost statistical resume of her life.

Vonnie gave Rene and me a reassuring nod indicating that we'd get past the window dressing eventually.

Jenny went on for another ten minutes or so, spouting schools, hobbies, favorite music, in short, everything but the bottom line.

I did notice that Jenny was becoming less uneasy as she spoke.

Finally, she ran out of facts and figures, stopping abruptly just after the part about her aerobics class.

Jenny had the habit of ending declarative sentences with an inflection as if she were asking a question, to which one of the three of us would inevitably say “Yes?” or “Uh huh?”, and she would then continue.

I was curious what the result would be if we held back on one of these tacit endorsements. Would she just stop talking? I'll never know. Neither I nor either of the other two had the self control to suppress these automatic and rhetorical approvals. So we went along participating in her monologue. If you don't mind, I'll skip these responses in the narrative, so just imagine them at the appropriate times.

“Thank you very much, Jenny.” Vonnie spoke in soft, measured tones. “Now, why don't you tell us a little about when you started dressing.”

“Oh, that!” she replied as if it were an aspect of her life she considered unimportant. “Well, as far back as I can remember, I always felt more like a girl than a boy. When I was, like, real little? I just, you know, felt more comfortable in, like, a dress or something flouncy?”

“There was a girl about my age who lived next door to me at the time - that was when we still lived in L.A. - called Charlene? I called her *Charlie-horse* and she called me *Jiffy* and I'd like go over to her house a lot and her mom would like let us dress up in her clothes, which of course were 'way too big? Once I put on one of Charlie-horse's dresses and we went over to show my mom who just, you know, came unglued laughing, 'cause we had lipstick on like all over our mouths and we probably looked real silly. Mom then got me a cheap little 'dress-up' play dress of my own so I wouldn't have to borrow any more.”

“Well, up until I was like five or six everybody thought it was like real cute and all? Then one day I remember my folks like having this, you know, humongous like blowup about it all? And, anyhow, my mom and dad like agreed that I was like getting too old to dress up and all, so like that was it, and they told me not to do it anymore.”

Jenny paused and smiled sweetly as if she had reached a point in her story where we should all stop and reflect.

I took advantage and relaxed. Finally, a period!.

Vonnie urged her on. “So, you stopped wearing girls' clothes. How did that make you feel?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose.

“Like bogus! It was, you know, like a super downer. But that wasn't the worst part. It's like my dad got religious about it and figured I should like be interested in sports and all? So he like starts encouraging me to like play football and stuff like that? I mean, it's not like I didn't play baseball once in a while and even football once or twice but they weren't like my favorite things to do, you know?”

“Anyhow, like I was a good kid and wasn't into disobeying my parents so I hung in with the pants and all until I thought I'd explode. I mean, I'd like see the girls I knew all dressed up or going to each others' houses and it would like freak me out, you know?”

I didn't know, but I said “Uh huh?” anyhow. It was my turn.

Jenny, refueled by my assent, then resumed as was the custom.

I had become part of the process; I was an accessory.

“I guess I was like fourteen or so when I couldn't hold my breath anymore? So I started sneaking into my mom's room and like dressing up in her clothes like whenever I could. I was like slim but 5'8" and Mom's like 5'6" or so? So like her stuff was really tight and some of it I couldn't like get into at all.”

At this point, Jenny giggled openly.

We all smiled with her at the picture of her struggling into clothes too small for her frame.

Jenny resumed.

“Anyway, like up to that time Halloween was the only time I'd like get a break? I mean every Halloween I'd get like dressed up to the max. One year I was Tinkerbell; another I was a witch. When I was like twelve I was a cheerleader and it was like no biggie, you know? I mean all the other kids thought I was like real cute. And like even Dad thought it was okay? It really didn't matter anyhow because where it was, was like inside me all the time. Like you don't change that sort of thing by pushing down on it, you know?”

This time, it was Rene who said, “Yes,” in a way that left no doubt that he knew exactly what she meant.

At this juncture, something subtle happened to Jenny's speech. It was as if she switched gears and abruptly the inflection and superfluous, *valley-girl* words seemed to diminish dramatically.

I wasn't sure whether this signaled a change in the pace of the story, or whether she was just becoming more comfortable with us.

“It was in the fall of my senior year in high school and there was the annual homecoming game. There had been the usual school festivities, you know, the election of the homecoming queen and her court, and it really kind of got to me. Up 'till then, I'd been a pretty good sport about it all, confining myself to the surreptitious dressing opportunities and good ol' Halloween. But it was **really** starting to get to me.”

Jenny then began to sob lightly, putting her head in her hands. Rene went over and placed his hand lightly on her back without saying anything. After about a minute or so, she pulled out a hankie, dabbed her eyes, and smiled at Rene who returned to his seat.

She proceeded with her story.

“There was this girl I hung out with called Angela. We were like really thick. We shared everything and so Angie knew all about me. I kind of let my hair down about how I was coming unglued over like holding my breath and Angie suggested that I wear something cute to the homecoming game. At first I said I couldn't but I knew in my heart that I really wanted to. I kind of fantasized about it at first. Then, Angie said I should try on a couple of her things, in view of the fact that we were almost the same size. It sounded like fun to me. No, it was more than just fun. It was like something I had to do.”

“Angie always dressed really cute. Her folks weren't rich, but she and her mom had good taste and she had a neat wardrobe. Well, we made a date for me to come over to her house on Saturday, which was just before the week of the game. I still hadn't agreed to go through with dressing up for the game, I was just going to, you know, try on some of her outfits. Her folks were visiting friends for a picnic or something and, like me, Angie was an only child, so we had the whole day to ourselves.”

“I got to Angie's house at around noon. Her folks were already gone. Angie wanted to have some lunch, so we fixed a couple of sandwiches and ate them with lemonade or iced tea or something. We cleaned up the dishes and Angie winked at me and said something like, ‘Let's do it!’. I'd dressed up before, but always alone. This was different. I felt like really flushed and my heart was beating like really fast?”

“We went into her room and she opened her closet. I'd seen most of her outfits when she wore them to school. I didn't pick anything out so Angie suggested I try a cute little gray jumper with a white blouse and black flats. I said that was fine by me. Angie got a funny smile on her face and asked me if my legs were shaved. I said they were; that I'd done it before I'd left home. Then she handed me a pair of panty hose and a slip and told me I should go into the bathroom and put them both on. When I came out, she passed me the blouse, jumper, and shoes. Everything fit fine except the shoes which were a little loose. Then she showed ...”

Vonnie interrupted. “Jenny? How did you feel at that point?”

“Oh wow! Like rad. What can I say? It was like the right-on thing to do, you know what I mean? It felt ... just right. How can I explain it? Imagine that someone had made you dress in clothes of the opposite sex from the time you were five and finally you had this friend who understood how you felt and was letting you dress naturally without having to sneak around to do it.”

I glanced at Rene, who was concentrating on everything Jenny said. He was more absorbed in all this than I'd ever seen him in anything before.

Vonnie used the ensuing pause in Jenny's narrative to offer us another round of brandy and poured Jenny a glass of ginger ale. The fire was starting to burn down, so I threw on another couple of logs which caught almost immediately.

After we were all settled back in place, Jenny resumed her story.

“My hair wasn't real long, but long enough to be brushed into a feminine style. So Angie sat me down and worked on my hair, which I'd shampooed and conditioned that morning. Next, she did my eyebrows and put on a little makeup. You know, a little mascara, some eye liner, and a touch of lip gloss. All this time, I was like in the dark because Angie wouldn't let me look in the mirror. When she was all done, she finally let me stand up and check myself out.

“Wow, like I almost fainted. It's not like I was such a fox or anything but I looked just like a girl. Angie said I was `a doll' and that I looked `darling'. Those were her exact words.”

“Then, Angie says that we should like walk down to the store. I said I just couldn't. Angie said yes I could. Well, I **knew** I would. I like had to, you know? I mean, the genie was out of the bottle. So out we went.

“There we were walking to the store. Just a couple of teenage girls doing what teenage girls do - no biggie, right? But I wasn't walking on Seaview Terrace, I was walking on a cloud! Like there's no way to tell you how it felt.

“We passed some people - neighbors washing cars, cutting their lawns, and a couple of guys from school working on a horrible piece of junk they called a car. The guys were Bob Downs and his pal Jack something-or-other. I didn't know them real well. They recognized Angie and yelled, `Hi', and Bob asked her who her `foxy friend' was. Angie yelled back wouldn't they like to know and stuck her nose up in the air. I didn't believe a word of it, but it sure made me feel good.

“We finally got to town and decided to go to the ice cream store instead of the market. We went dutch on a couple of sundaes. I've never enjoyed a butterscotch sundae more than that one. It had three scoops of vanilla ice cream covered with nuts and whipped cream and ...” Jenny caught herself as she realized she was getting into details which didn't exactly apply to the situation at hand. “Sor-ry.” she sang, rolling her eyes back.

“Well, anyhow, that was about it. It was like the biggest day in my life up to that point - right up there with Christmas and birthdays. When we got back to Angie's, she like puts it to me and says, `Well, are you going to do it?' and she has this like mischievous smile as she's saying it. I said, `Oh yeah!'. I didn't really have any choice. I knew if I didn't, I'd never forgive myself.

“Getting back into my jeans that afternoon was the toughest thing I'd ever had to do, but I did it. And I went home and had dinner with my folks like nothing had happened. The rest of the week crawled by in a major way. I mean it was like five years instead of five days. But finally, Friday came. I told my folks I was going with Angie to the game and drove over to her house in our big Buick which I called 'the Queen Mary'.

“Angie's parents were in the den watching TV and I said 'Hi' to them and then Angie dragged me into her room on the pretext of seeing a new tropical fish she'd bought. Once we were in there, everything went into high gear and we pretty-well repeated the procedure of the past Saturday. I think we broke a world record for getting me dressed and made up.

“The next thing you know, we're tiptoeing down the hall trying not to be seen by Mr. and Mrs. DeCarlo. When we were safely out of their line of vision, we called 'Bye' and tore out the front door, giggling like mad.

“All the way to the game, I'm like getting second thoughts. The more I thought about it, the worse it got and soon I was shaking big time. When we pulled into the school parking lot, I like told Angie that I couldn't go through with it. I felt really stupid. Like, here I was, a boy dressed up in this cute jumper and blouse outfit and like all made up and I just **knew** that everybody was going to recognize me and make fun and call me a sissy and all.

“Angie took both my shoulders and looked me square in the eye and had this like real serious look on her face, which was very unusual for her 'cause she's such a cutup, and she says: 'Look, tonight you're Jennifer (my real name was Jeff so I don't know where she got Jennifer, but it stuck). Last Saturday, you walked with me in broad daylight in front of God and everybody and no biggie, right? This is night and everybody's a hundred times more interested in how they look and in the game than in you. People see what they expect to see. If you don't come with me, I'll never speak to you again.'

“I knew she was right and I also knew that I really had to go through with it. So I said okay, but that if anybody made me I'd never speak to her again. That kind of cut the tension 'cause we both knew I didn't really mean it. Angie gave my hand a quick squeeze, said 'You look marboles, my deah, simply marboles.', and we hopped out of the car and right into a crowd of sophomores who were pushing each other and being real stupid.

“From that point on it was like downhill, except for during half-time. We sat away from the kids we knew real well, among a group of freshmen and their parents and enjoyed the first half.

“When the gun ended the half, I see Tom, and Sandy Williams, and Ken, and that whole gang - kids Angie and I hung out with - walking our way. They'd spotted us. I saw them looking at us while they talked and all and I just knew I was a goner. I told Angie that I was going to split but she said it would be a like no sweat and what fun it would be to pull the wool over their eyes and that, if they made me, we'd just say it was a joke, which was the truth anyhow, right?”

Was it the brandy? Maybe it was the Gothic setting and the fire, I don't know. I just know that I found myself as swept up in this incredible adventure as I had ever been in any movie or novel.

The impact of her story was no doubt heightened by Jenny's engaging and forth-right personality. She was so full of innocent, youthful enthusiasm that it was catching, and she had all of us hanging on her every word.

At Vonnie's suggestion, Jenny had paused to take a breather. When Rene and I demurred at the offer of more brandy, Vonnie left the room to return with a tray of fancy cookies and coffee. After about ten minutes, Vonnie asked Jenny to resume her account.

Jenny stared up at the ceiling as if to collect her thoughts and then picked up where she'd left off before the half-time break.

"Well, the gang came over and all said, 'Hi', and Tom says to Angie, 'wasn't it a bummer the way the ref had called Walt Genesich out of bounds when everyone could see both his feet were still inside the line?' Angie agrees and then says 'Guys, meet my cousin Jenny from Seattle'. They all just said 'Hi' and then went on talking like I was really her cousin or something.

"Well, that was about it, except I caught a couple of guys eyeing me from time to time. Actually, they were probably eyeing Angie 'cause she's like really pretty? But, Angie said that a couple of times, she could tell it was me they were checking out. Anyhow, I chose to believe that she was right.

"After the game we met the other kids at Rod's Pit and talked and ate burgers. When it got to be about eleven or so, we all just kind of split for the night.

"Angie and I were planning to steal into her room so I could change back but, just as she's turning the key in the front door, Mr. DeCarlo opens it and asks her how the game was and where's Jeff? She explained that Jeff had dropped us off and gone home, and introduced me as Jenny. Angie then said she'd like to have me in to see her new fish, but Mr. DeCarlo said it was too late and to ask me back another time.

"Mr. DeCarlo then asked me if I needed a ride home, but I said that there wasn't any need as I lived just a block away. I had my fingers crossed that he wouldn't press it. He didn't, thank God. Angie then turns to me and says 'Goodnight Jenny. Why don't you come over tomorrow and I'll show you my fish?' and then in she goes.

"Okay. I'm like standing out on her front porch and its like 11:30 and here I am all dressed up and my folks are expecting me home and they like **always** waited up for me.

"I got back in the Queen Mary and drove home, all the while hoping that Mom and Dad would break the tradition and go to bed early. No way. As I drove up, I could see them in there watching TV or reading or whatever. I figured I had just a chance of running past the den and into my room without being discovered so that's what I did, right? Not so fast!

"I got past the den all right, but just as I'm zooming down the hall, Dad pops out of the kitchen and we're like face-to-face. At first he looks at me like who-the-hell-are-

you, then comes the recognition, and it's like oh-my-god. Then he takes my arm and escorts me into the den where Mom looks up from her book and does a series of double takes.

“Once I got over the shock at being caught, I was actually relieved. Now, it was our problem not just my problem. It was time to come clean, so I did. It took a little doing, but my folks aren't that bad and we've always been real close so they finally got the picture that this was like the real me.

“At first, they weren't sure what to do, but Mom got Dr. Green's phone number and set up an appointment for the three of us. I didn't know what to expect, but Dr. Green was super.”

Here, she smiled at Vonnie who, with maternal warmth, nodded at her to continue.

“During our initial discussion, Dr. Green explained to my folks that we'd like have to talk a lot - her and me - to determine the extent and nature of my involvement.”

Jenny wrinkled her nose, indicating to us that she was quoting Vonnie verbatim.

“She explained to us that, if it was a behavioral thing, we could possibly correct it, but that if it were like endemic we might have to consider gender reassignment, in other words, that I would become a girl for real. She told them that whatever came of all this would be for the best and that this was just the right time to deal with the whole thing.

“So, I started seeing Dr. Green after school every Tuesday afternoon. On my first visit, Dr. Green gave me a written test with lots of questions about what I liked and didn't like, what I'd do in this or that situation, and so on. It was kind of fun. The next two sessions I spent just kind of telling my life story. After that, we got into how I felt about gender issues and all that. Finally, Dr. Green asked me a lot of questions about how I'd feel in various situations as a girl or woman. It was a lot like work. I mean, I'd never really thought about many of the things she was asking before. Some things I had to think really hard about because I was like trying to be real honest in my answers. A few of her questions, I couldn't even answer.

“I'd been seeing Dr. Green for a little over six months when she requested my folks accompany me for my next visit. We had to reschedule it for the following day `cause my dad was out of town. I was real excited `cause I figured this was like the grand finale and Dr. Green wasn't about to let me in on her conclusions without my folks there and vice-versa. Maybe I'd better let Dr. Green tell you what she said during that meeting because my head was like somewhere else at that point.”

Jenny looked over at Vonnie as if passing her the baton. Vonnie smiled in agreement and picked up the narrative.

“Jenny's done just an excellent job of conveying the situation. At first, as with all my patients, I suppressed any conclusions, although I must admit that I had a suspicion that Jenny would be a definite reassignment candidate, just based on what I saw. The conditions were ideal in the sense that not only did Jenny come from a caring environment, but also because her parents were emotionally stable and objective on the issue of Jenny's future. You'd be surprised how often parents resist resolution in these cases.

“In any event, as our sessions progressed, and as I reviewed the results of Jenny's initial screening tests against her history, I realized that this was definitely a justified reassignment if ever I'd seen one. When Jenny and her parents came in for that final session, I simply laid it out for them.

“It took two hours to do it. I'd prepared charts, showing Jenny's test placement against other people her age of both sexes. I also summarized the sessions in such a way as to disclose all of the pertinent conclusions without compromising the confidentiality of our relationship. There were certain things that I felt were Jenny's prerogative as to whether and when they should be disclosed.

“Needless to say, it was a heavy dose for the parents, but it seemed to me they were well prepared emotionally for what I had to say. I suggested that Jenny (at that time, Jeff) be allowed to dress in a **slightly** more feminine manner and that we should begin estrogen therapy so as to balance the androgen flow which was already well underway.

“I felt that the transition should be modest at first and that any overt feminization in apparel - that is, dresses and such - be deferred until after Jenny had graduated from high school. Summer was still about six months off, as I recall. In the meantime, she could dress in an androgynous way in public and at school, and concurrently the hormones would begin their work. I projected that, by the time Jenny was twenty-one, she would be in an excellent position to make the decision as to whether she wished to proceed with the final, surgical phase of reassignment.

“I wrote a note to Dr. Carter, an endocrinologist, recommending a qualified ERT program, subject to his initial screening. That's where I'm going to pass the ball back. Jenny, would you take us from that point, about a year and a half ago, to today?”

Jenny was sitting very straight in the love seat in spite of the hour and the toll that the presentation must have had on her. She appeared eager to continue.

“After meeting with Dr. Green, Mom and Dad talked with me in the car, during dinner, and for - it must have been three or four hours that night. The ten days before I could see the endocrinologist dragged by until I thought I'd go crazy. Finally, the big day arrived and Dr. Carter's nurse took a blood sample and the doctor came in and talked to me and gave me a physical exam. I figured he'd like have to wait for the results or something before I actually got the pills, so I was prepared to bide my time, but just as I was leaving the office, he said he'd almost forgotten this one thing and he scribbled out a prescription and handed it to me.

“At that point, I was like, on cloud nine. I went home with the prescription safely folded into my pocket and told Mom, who went with me to the drug store where I got it filled. I took the bottle of pills home and put them in the fridge. It's funny, but I was going to wait `till the next morning to take the first one. Well, that lasted about five minutes and, unable to hold myself in, I went over to the fridge and popped one of the pills out of the bottle and into my mouth.

“My folks and I had agreed to keep the whole thing just between the three of us and Dr. Green until we'd reached some sort of conclusion, so I'd had to keep Angie in the dark; she thought I was being treated for an allergy. I was bursting to tell her so, with

Mom's agreement, I called Angie that afternoon and asked her to come over so I could tell her all about it.

“At first, I was like really up but after a month of taking the pills, nothing happened and I got kind of depressed. I mean, here it was, the big bang and like not even a whimper, right? I even called Dr. Green one day, but she just told me to be patient and concentrate on school and everything would be fine. The first thing I noticed not long after that was some soreness in my breast.”

Jenny was obviously embarrassed and looked to Vonnie for reassurance, who smiled at her. Jenny then proceeded.

“As time went on, I got used to the tenderness but failed to notice the gradual but persistent swelling in, you know, the same area. Then one day that summer, Angie and I and some of the other kids were playing touch football at the park and like Angie pulls me aside and tells me that my breasts are starting to show. At first, I thought she was kidding but she wasn't, so I ran into the rest room and looked in the mirror and sure enough, if you looked real hard, you could see them. I just like floated out of there. Needless to say, that put an end to the football game for me and so I went home.

“Over the year since then, I've continued to develop.” Jenny blushed again.

“And I've noticed other changes too, like body hair going away and hips growing and stuff like that.”

I tried to imagine what else there was, “like that,” but couldn't. I guess you had to go through it to know.

At this point, Rene asked a question for the first time that evening.

“Jenny, have you ever regretted your decision?”

“I'm really glad you asked that, `cause I was wondering the same thing at the beginning. The answer is not even a little bit. In fact, I'm more sure now than ever that what I'm doing is right. If I feel the same way when I'm twenty-one as I do now, I'll go for the reassignment without a second thought.

“It's funny but before meeting Dr. Green, I had this really negative attitude about anything masculine as far as I was concerned. Like I thought that if I ever had the chance, all I'd wear would be dresses and skirts. The funny thing is, now that I can wear dresses whenever I want, I wear like jeans and shorts a lot and don't dress up real often `cause it's such a bother. Although I still get a kick out of dressing up, I pretty much only do it if I'm going out or something - like tonight.”

I followed up with a question which was neutral but which was something I was wondering about. “Whatever happened to Angie? Do you still see one another?”

Jenny beamed.

“Angie and I are like best buddies. We're both in our sophomore year at UC Santa Cruz and we share this really neat apartment and do just about everything together. I don't know how I could have made it without her. I'm sure that Angie and I will always be close.”

The pendulum clock, as if on cue, ominously heralded midnight with a seemingly interminable chime sequence.

We all looked at one another somewhat foolishly as conversation yielded to the dominating reverberation of the twelve gongs. When the last had faded, Vonnie announced an end to the night's session, thanking us all for coming.

She and Jennie hugged.

It had been one of the most interesting evenings of my life, and I was more than a little sorry it had to end. I would like to have heard more of Jenny's experiences.

Superbowl Sunday

The next time I saw Rene, it was in February. I was back for my second break and a bunch of us got together at Mike's to watch the Superbowl game. Some of the guys brought their wives or girlfriends. I just brought myself, as my traveling had virtually eliminated involvement with persons of the female persuasion. Whoops, I mean women. One thing I've learned out of all this is to be specific about gender.

Anyhow, Mike's got one of those big projection sets. We're sitting there, arguing over who's going to win and by how much and Pat yells out, "Hey, where's the food?"

The ladies were in the kitchen with the exception of Jane Brock, who's as much into football as any guy I know. No response from the kitchen. Just as I'm about to point out to Pat that his legs appear to be in perfect working order, Rene volunteers and disappears from the room.

Pat's sitting next to me on the sofa. He leans over swallowing a swig of beer and says, "What do you think about Frenchie?"

"What's to think?" I responded.

"Haven't you noticed?" he continues. "He's really gotten flaky over this swish detail. He's even starting to walk like a chick."

At this point, I was about ready to pop old Pat in the mush. I mean, it's one thing to kid a guy, but this was different.

"Hey, get off his back okay? He's just doing his job. You're out of line." I was sore and Pat knew it.

He backed off.

"I didn't mean anything, Joe. Hell, I like Frenchie as much as anybody. I just don't like what's happening to him."

The others must've overheard our little exchange but nobody said anything.

Then, in walks Rene wearing a damn apron with a tray of snacks just like it was the most natural thing in the world. As he sets the tray down, he bends neatly at the hips, sticking his fanny out just like a girl. Then back he goes, into the kitchen!

I saw Pat look over at me out of the corner of my eye, but I pretended to be absorbed in a razor-blade commercial which happened to be on at the moment.

For the rest of the afternoon, Rene spent his time either bringing in beer and food or hanging out in the kitchen. I could hear him in there laughing about who-knows-

what with the ladies. Annette was with him too. I knew Rene never cared much about football, but this wasn't right.

People started leaving after the game was over. I stuck around purposely to see if I could talk to Rene. I poked my head in the kitchen and found him sitting on the counter, talking to the remaining wives and girlfriends. They were all giggling over something. Rene didn't even seem embarrassed, sitting there in his ruffled yellow apron, sharing small talk with a bunch of ladies.

“Hey, you missed a great game.” I enthused.

“Who won?” Rene asked, arching his eyebrows.

“San Francisco.” I replied.

He said something like, ‘That's great’, pursing his lips into a smile.

God. He was even beginning to look like a girl! I gave up trying to get him alone. I'd catch him tomorrow. I said good-bye to the ladies and split.

I had 'till next Sunday before I had to head back east again, but I was working with Cliff and didn't get to see Rene at all during the week. It seemed that something always got in the way.

Friday, I made it a point to grab him.

“Hey, Frenchie, how 'bout we take a bike ride tomorrow?”

Now, I never gave much of a damn about bicycles, but I knew Rene loved riding. I figured this would be a good way to get him alone so we could talk.

He gave me a big smile, “Sure Joe, I'd like that.”

We set it up to meet down at the beach at ten o'clock; Rene would bring the bikes, as he had two and I didn't have one to my name.

A Box Within A Box

I guess I'd had too much suds Friday night, and I got up a little late. It was about 10:15 by the time I got to the rendezvous.

Rene was already there and had the bikes off the rack and ready to go. He gave me a fifteen-minute crash course in how to ride his bike, which had more gears than you'd ever use and damn skinny tires.

I finally got the hang of it and off we went.

We'd ridden for about an hour and a half before we took a breather and sat down on a sand dune near the water.

A family was barbecuing hot dogs about fifty yards from us. The smell of the roasting franks merged with the salt air in that special way that puts all other food in a different category.

Rene was wearing a loose-fitting tee shirt, shorts, and one of those hard hats he called a “casque”. His legs were shaved smooth like a girl's.

I figured it was part of the program. Still, I couldn't get over how feminine they looked. Would my legs look that good if I shaved them? Probably not. He was also wearing his hair longer. That too, I figured, was explained by his assignment.

Then I saw something I couldn't rationalize away.

There were two small but unmistakable peaks under the tee shirt. At first, I thought I was seeing things, but another look told me that what I saw was real. He was sprouting boobs! Not big by any means, but nonetheless a good start on a pair of knockers.

I decided to get right to the point, so to speak.

“Looks like those pills are starting to give you a bit of a shape,” I blurted.

Rene blushed just like a girl and responded: “The dosage has been increased and now I'm taking another hormone along with the purple pills. I didn't know it was so obvious; outside of Annette you're the only one who's noticed. There's been a lot of tenderness also. I can't even sleep on my stomach anymore.”

I could not believe it! Here's this guy - always seemed real straight, a nice guy too - turning into a filly without batting an eyelash. I didn't know what to say. After an awkward pause, I ventured, “But, aren't you bothered by it? I mean, it's changing you, for God's sake!”

He answered too quickly.

“Vonnie said that this, ah, swelling is just a minor symptom and will probably not get any worse.”

“Probably?” I exploded. “What if it does?”

He gave me a resigned grin and sighed before talking.

“Joe, this will be hard for you to understand, it's even hard for me to understand. This ... this thing. It's like ...” He broke off, and then resumed.

“Have you ever seen one of those little Russian boxes? You open it, and inside is another box, and inside that, yet another. You think you're through, but you're not. This is like those boxes.”

“When this started you know, the funny clothes and all, it to me was like a joke. It was fun. Then that night, when we first met Vonnie and she showed us those pictures and told us that several of them were actually guys, something changed for me. You remember Jenny was the last one, number 22?” I nodded.

“When Jenny told her story, I could very much relate to many of her experiences and feelings. Maybe some day I'll tell you about it. I know this can't make any sense to you, but one thing I've learned is to say what I feel. I know I can trust you; that's why I'm being so open.”

He was looking me straight in the eyes as he said this.

I'm sure the surprise showed on my face. How could Rene identify with Jenny? I felt like I'd fallen down a rabbit hole. This was getting uncomfortable but, at the same time, I was fascinated. I mean this was a guy I'd known for years. He was a cop, like

me. I had a million questions bouncing around in my head. I fired off the first one that came to my mind.

“Frenchie, are you telling me you want to be an `X'?” (At this point, I should explain that in California, “X” means girl or woman, and evolved from the practice of suffixing the PC offense number with letter “X” when the incident involved a female.)

He got a funny look on his face, almost like he was ready to cry. He bit his lower lip and stared for a moment at the crashing surf before answering.

“I don't know.” was his simple response.

A light breeze blew some of Rene's hair into his face. He tossed his head and smiled a little.

“Do you know what my name means in French Joe?”

In spite of the fact that Rene and his whole family had taken on American citizenship long ago, he took his heritage very seriously and thought of himself as French.

As I shook my head, I became aware of a kind of softness in his facial features. Nothing all that specific, but unquestionably there, nonetheless. His speech and gestures had also become somewhat feminine; not the exaggerated camp of a drag queen, but such that at times I almost felt I was talking to a woman.

Rene continued.

“It means `reborn', which is very funny, because that's what I feel is happening to me now. I'm changing every day. I'm having trouble sleeping at night; my mind goes a hundred miles an hour. I tell you I don't know what I want because this isn't about knowing, it's about feeling. I feel better about myself now than I ever have. I don't know where this is leading me. At first, I thought I did, but now I'm not sure. I only know that what's happening to me is right.”

I spilled out the next thing that came to my mind.

“Rene, are you a transie?”

At this, he actually laughed and then, uncharacteristically, launched into a lecture.

“Joe, cross dressing is something you do, not something you are. People cross dress for all kinds of reasons. Drag queens do it because they're gay, and to attract men. Female impersonators do it for a living. We even did it in the course of our jobs - you too, is that not so?”

He pointed at me, smiling. I grinned weakly and shrugged.

He continued making his point.

“Some guys do it for erotic stimulation, and still others do it to express something deep inside. We use the word 'transvestite' because it works, but like many generalizations, it fails to distinguish the underlying causes and places many different people into one simple category.”

I couldn't resist taking a shot at him.

“God Rene, what a speech! A simple 'yes' or 'no' would have sufficed.” I felt a sense of frustration. I'd ask him a straight question; he'd come back with some gobble-de-gook, philosophical response. I decided to get blunt. “Why don't you just start wearing dresses and get it over with?”

Instead of getting angry, he just gave me another off-the-wall response.

“I may, if it makes sense. This is happening to me from the inside and growing outwards. The time isn't right now. Perhaps it will never be. I don't know.”

I then asked him what his wife, Annette, thought about it all.

He seemed to ponder my question for a moment, and then answered.

“She takes it well. We've talked a lot about it all - for hours and hours, actually. She loves me and realizes that I'm going through this. That is to say, she knows that this is something which is happening to me, not something which I have made to happen. She's a wonderful person.”

His eyes were misty as he said this.

I was in a state of disbelief, and still had a lot of questions. Did Vonnie know that this had gone beyond a simple assignment? What had happened to him as a kid to make him identify with Jenny? My questions would have to wait. I could tell that Rene didn't want to talk about it anymore when, getting up, he said “Thank you Joe, for being a friend and listening to my silly problem.”

He touched my arm lightly as he spoke, then turned to pick up his bike. He'd given me a lot to think about.

This was all new stuff to me; it wasn't something I'd lost a whole lot of sleep over up to this point.

Off To School

The next morning, I was on my way to Virginia on a United 757 out of SFO. Unlike a lot of people, I don't mind flying. In fact, I kind of like it. You get to sit back and read, snooze, watch a movie, belt a few, and generally relax. I was lucky in having a tier of three seats to myself, so I stretched out to enjoy the five and a half hour flight. I picked up my primer on finger printing and started thumbing through. Fingerprint identification and linking to known offenders was to be my last course. There's more to those little smudges than you might think.

I was surprised to learn that the tented arch, generally a rare pattern, is quite common among Orientals. Other patterns are distinguished by whether there is a single or double delta, and if single, whether the central loop is ulnar or radial. It used to be that you had to have a clean set of ten prints to locate someone in the files, because the *Henry System* required all ten to compile the classification. A partial was useless, except as evidence. Now, we could locate a suspect with a partial, even linking it with physical features or an MO. I wasn't much on academic pursuits in college but for

some reason, I was really enjoying these courses. Maybe what made this different was that it tied into my work.

Despite my interest in the subject, I found my mind wandering back to the previous day and my conversation with Rene. It seemed unreal to me now - almost like a dream. I tried to make sense out of it. Being a cop, I'd seen a lot and considered myself pretty enlightened. I was fair-minded about gays and other minorities and never begrudged a woman getting an even shake on the force. Now, I was beginning to realize that what I'd been doing was tolerating people and things I didn't understand. I mean, I accepted them, but I didn't really relate to them. I'd never thought about it much before now, at least not from this angle.

Rene and I went back a long way. I couldn't just dismiss him as a flake. He was an intelligent, nice guy. He had a sweet wife, a nice family, and he was a good cop. I couldn't figure out why he was so affected by this gender stuff.

Was Vonnie brainwashing him? Hell, that didn't make sense. She was straight enough, notwithstanding the fact that I found some of what she said kind of bizarre. I could understand why Pat pulled out; I'd have done the same.

I just couldn't see why Rene didn't.

As I sat thinking, my gaze wandered to a lady across the aisle in the next row up. She was the type I always seemed most attracted to - the kind more often referred to as "pretty" than "beautiful". As I'm looking straight at the back of her neck, noticing the way stray wisps had fallen from a knot of chestnut hair onto her neck, she turns her head as if she could feel it and catches me staring.

I've classified four basic responses women give in such situations. One - They shoot you a look that would wither a watermelon; Two - They flirt; Three - They ignore you; Four - They respond to the unspoken complement with an open smile.

She fell into the fourth group.

I returned the smile and she went back to whatever she'd been doing. A doubt shot into my mind like a leg cramp - Could "she" be a guy? My rejection of this possibility was immediate, but was followed by a lingering malaise. I quickly picked up my fingerprint book and resumed reading.

My perceptions, assumptions, and cherished beliefs had been altered forever.

CHAPTER THREE

Home Again

By the end of March, I was home for good. I'd graduated in the top 10% of the class and received a special commendation to boot. I felt great! I got back on a Saturday night and hit the sack, having eaten on the plane. I couldn't understand why everybody griped about airline food. It tasted good to me.

I was glad to be back in my own place. Sunday, I slept in 'till ten and hopped down to the local coffee shop for some waffles and eggs. When I finished, I took a walk down to the river. The day was fresh and it felt good to stretch my legs. There's something special about Spring in beach front communities. I was breathing in the fresh, salt air and generally enjoying the day.

There were lots of people jogging and riding bikes, wearing every kind of outfit, in a rush to go where each other had been. Me, I was just walking along taking in the view. As I rounded the last corner leading to the bridge, I saw two great-looking ladies on 12-speeds. As they passed me, I was a little embarrassed to realize that one of them was Annette, Rene's wife. She didn't see me.

Annette's a real looker - pretty, blond, nice figure. The best thing about her is that she doesn't flaunt it as beautiful women often do. She was a prize; I guess I'd always been a little envious of Rene for having married her. Seemed like some guys had all the luck. As that thought passed my mind, I began to feel guilty. All the luck? I knew Rene must be going through hell right now. I wouldn't have traded places with him for a million bucks, even with Annette as part of the bargain.

The next day, I was back at work. I walked into the station and made the rounds, getting filled in on war stories from the beat cops just checking in for the shift.

"Those earrings are adorable. Where did you buy them?"

"At this great little southwestern shop in old town called 'Taos Village'. It's just full of fun Indian things. I picked these up for \$12."

The voices came from inside Dispatch. They belonged to Lucy Sanchez and some other woman I couldn't quite place. I was standing outside, trading insults with Red Johnson, the day Watch Commander. I remember thinking how funny it is the way women get so excited about little things. It seems that they're always ready to jump up and down and giggle over the damndest stuff - the universal language of women.

I don't recall exactly what I was saying to Red, when my jaw dropped.

The "woman" Lucy'd been talking to, came out of Dispatch. It was Rene! He had on stone-wash jeans with a blue denim shirt. The shirt was hanging loose, but the jeans were tight. Rene had obviously lost a lot of weight since I'd last seen him. Every place but in his butt that is, which seemed fuller. As he looked my way, I saw that either he was wearing falsies or his bosoms had swollen more in the last several weeks. What made me suspect the latter was the fact that although still not large, they were now prominent enough so there was a hint of a shape under the ample material of the shirt. Falsies would've been more obvious.

"Hi Joe," he chirped.

"Uh, hi Frenchie. What's happening?"

If he saw my surprise, he didn't let on.

He said something I didn't catch, told me he'd see me later, and then walked down the hall to our office. I looked at Red, who just gave me a blank stare. It was clear to me that Rene still had his problem!

One discipline you learn as an investigator is observation. The first thing you notice about a person is their sex (guess I mean gender). I've seen witnesses mistake everything else - height, weight, clothing, even race - but rarely gender. I'm not sure exactly what's involved in the gender recognition process, but it's among the most fundamental, instantaneous, and reliable of the human faculties.

Rene had been wearing a shirt and jeans. His hair was on the long side, but some guys wear it longer. His figure was androgynous, but I've seen lots of men who had more on top than Rene and you still knew they were guys. Taken a piece at a time, he was well within the boundaries of how a guy could look, and yet the total picture was one of unmistakable femininity.

I followed Rene down to Mike's office. Mike occupied a glass-walled enclosure in the northwest corner of the 30' by 40' bull pen we called home. I walked into Mike's office and closed the door. He was fiddling with his pipe when I came in. He put down his pipe, shook my hand, and greeted me with a broad grin.

“Joe. Good to see ya. Did you teach those smartass feds anything?”

I was happy to see Mike again. He was a good guy. I often thought how lucky I was to have a boss like him.

As I took a seat across the desk, Mike went on.

“Hey, we're all real proud of what you done back there, kid. Real good for a spaghetti slinger.”

I shot back, “Hell, you gotta have some edge to make it in a business run by micks.”

Mike laughed.

I decided to get right to what had been on my mind for the past several weeks.

“Mike, what the hell's going on with Frenchie?”

His glance wandered to the desk where Rene sat talking on the phone. Mike then looked at me with a kind of sad grin for a few seconds. Finally, he spoke.

“Once, when I was a kid, my pop brought home a bunch of live lobsters for dinner. That was before they cost as much as a small house. Dad was a softhearted guy and couldn't bear the thought of plunking the things into boiling water. Instead, he put them in cold water and then turned on the heat. The water just kept getting warmer, a



little bit at a time. At some point, they died, but I don't think they ever knew what hit 'em. When things happen a bit at a time like that, you don't really notice. That's how it's been with Frenchie, I guess. He's been changing so gradually, I don't think anybody has really paid much attention.”

He stopped to pack his pipe with tobacco, lit it, took a couple of puffs, and continued.

“I've always tried to run a top-drawer operation. As you know, we've got one of the best close ratios on part-1 crimes in the state. When that rapist hit, I was damn upset. I gotta admit, I've always had a grudging respect for professionals, like that safe cracker we called 'Mr. Clean', but to me, guys who commit violence against women, children, and old people are the slime of the earth.

“By the time he'd done his third hit, I knew that investigative techniques alone weren't going to nail him. That's when I implemented the decoy program.

“You, Rene, and Pat are good cops; some of the best I've ever had, in fact. But, it was soon clear to me that you guys didn't know squat about decoy work. That's where Vonnie came in. I was kicking the problem around with Phil one night, and he tells me about this woman his wife knows that specializes in gender research and therapy. He gave me her number, and I got in touch. The rest is history.”

Mike took a few puffs on his pipe. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts.

“When Pat wanted out, I couldn't blame him, but I was relieved that Rene chose to stick with it. Even though the beach rapist had stopped operating, I wanted to have at least one guy in the group who could do professional decoy work. The funny thing is, this is the first time I've ever really given it much thought. Looking at this through your eyes, Rene is taking this beyond just work. Is that how you see it?”

I answered simply: “You're damn straight!”

Mike again paused to puff on his pipe, then he got his *bright idea* look. You could almost see the light bulb come on over his head.

“It's a piece of cake. Frenchie could pass for a lady any place. Mission accomplished. We'll just pay Vonnie off, kiss her on both cheeks, and it's over. A couple of weeks, and Rene's back to his old self. You guys have worked together for a long time. Why don't you feel him out?”

Mike coughed as he realized too late the double meaning of what he'd said. I bit my tongue. Regaining his composure, Mike took a couple more puffs on his pipe and continued.

“See how he'd feel about winding this whole thing up. Knowing Frenchie, he probably stayed with the program because he didn't want to let me down. Go for a stakeout. That'll give you plenty of chance to talk. Whaddya think?”

I'd already talked to Rene, and my take was that this wouldn't be such a “piece of cake”, as the Chief thought. Still, what did I know?

I told Mike I'd take a whack at it and let him know. I left him with his pipe and went out to confront my partner.

Rene and Vick Corso were looking at some photographs when I came over to my old desk. Vick shook my hand and said it was good to have me back. He was going to team up with Pat on a series of convenience-store robberies that had been going down for the last several weeks. He spent the next hour or so bringing me up to date on outstanding cases.

One involved several threats against the mayor's wife. It had a red flag on the jacket, which meant top priority.

I suggested to Rene we 10-7 for some lunch and then do a stakeout at the mayor's house.

He said that would be fine and that he'd advise patrol, although he was dubious as to the value of a stakeout.

Revelations

I was driving and turned into a Taco Bell. Rene needled me.

“Joe, don't you ever get tired of Mexican food?”

It wasn't a fair question. I had pizza two, maybe three times a week. Still, I guess I had kind of worn ruts between the station and the two closest Mexican joints.

“Okay,” I acquiesced, “let's go someplace else. You pick it.”

We ended up at one of those fifties-style coffee shops. You know the kind, black and white checkered floors and chrome juke boxes. We grabbed a table at the back.

Rene asked the waitress how the Chinese chicken salad was. She told him it was “to die for”, so he got one of those.

I had a hard time imagining a salad worth checking out over so I ordered something called a “Fonzieburger”.

When we were alone, Rene tented the fingertips of both hands together, touching his index fingers to his lips. He opened his eyes wide and said: “So Joe, tell me all about FBI school.”

I silently counted to ten. Rene had **really** changed in the two months I'd been away!

I babbled about the school. A lot of baloney, really, but he seemed to be taking it all in. The food came, and we ate in relative silence. Rene left a good third of his salad, saying he was full. When I made a crack about seeing how he could get full on such a lot of food, he just gave me a cute smile.

We paid the bill and left.

For those of you who still think police work is exciting, I respectfully submit the supreme challenge of the stakeout. That's where you sit in a car for hours on end with nothing to do but to try and avoid the stares of people walking by and giving you the ray like you were some kind of creep. Whatever you're watching for doesn't happen nine times out of ten, and if it does, you usually have to slap your face a couple of times just to wake up.

Rene and I pulled up about three doors down and on the opposite side of the street from the mayor's place, a neat Spanish-style house with red tile roof and two olive trees in the front yard. It was dead quiet.

I figured this was my opportunity, but it was kind of like carving a turkey - I wasn't exactly sure where to begin.

I'm not personally much on psychology, but I figured there had to be some reason Rene had become so caught up in this thing. I mean, nobody told him he had to take it this far. It's one thing to learn how to pass as a chick and another to start living like one and, worse yet, liking it. I remembered his two references to when he was a kid. Something must've happened to him back then.

I started off with, "How's things been with you?"

He volleyed with something incisive like, "Fine."

I forged ahead. "I notice you're developing. Those pills must work, huh?"

He just smiled and said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't notice much of a difference myself."

Great! I was getting frustrated.

He was evading me and we both knew it.

I blew up. "Damn it, Frenchie, snap out of it. You've got everything going for you - great job, bitchin' wife, you're well-liked, and here you are like a god damn sissy, talking about earrings and developing knockers like a chick. What the hell are you doing?"

My pressure gauge was way up in the redline area and I guess my voice was a little on the loud side.

All right, I yelled at the guy.

Rene's chin started to tremble and his smile vanished like the sun when one of those super-dark little cumulus clouds passes in front of it.

Then - I kid you not - he starts crying.

Not sniffing, but real racking sobs. God, did I feel like two cents! I've never known what to do when a woman cries. I mean, you try to comfort them and they push you away. Ignore them, and you feel like a jerk. Either way, you lose.

Well, this was twice as bad for obvious reasons. I put my hand on his back and sure enough, he shook it off and said, "Leave me alone."

I sat and waited.

A young woman in a jogging suit walked by, pushing a baby in a carriage. She looked straight ahead.

It must've been five minutes before he calmed down.

Rene wiped his eyes with a piece of Kleenex and blew his nose. He tried to smile but I knew I'd truly hurt his feelings.

I broke the silence. "Look, Rene, I'm sorry for what I said. I like you. Hell, everybody does. It's just that I don't know how to handle all this. What can I do to help?"

He sniffed a couple of times and smiled again.

"I don't blame you Joe. You're one-hundred percent right. I've got everything and I'm risking it all for something I don't even understand. You're my friend and partner, and you deserve an explanation."

He then told me a story I'd just as soon not have heard.

"When I was fourteen we moved here from Canada. It was tough on all of us, especially Marie and me. We knew no one, and people here weren't nearly as friendly as in the village we came from. It was about that time that I started having the dreams. They were strange dreams, really. Always this woman was doing something to feminize me. I'd wake up shaking and ashamed, but also with a funny feeling in my stomach - not unpleasant, but unlike anything I'd felt before.

"I don't know how many dreams there were; maybe four, maybe six. I remember only the details of the last one. The faceless woman was putting my hair up in curlers. It seems funny now, looking back at it, but at the time it shook me horribly."

I was trying to relate to what he was telling me, but I couldn't. It was almost like something supernatural or occult.

He proceeded.

"The next morning was a Sunday. I remember it as if it were yesterday. We had all just come back from Mass. Marie had gone to visit a friend and Papa and Mama were in the kitchen. They always had coffee and talked after Mass. I went upstairs. The thought entered my head as to how it must feel to dress as a girl. I don't know why, but I decided to go to Marie's room and just touch one of her slips. I went to the drawer where I knew she kept her underclothes and opened it. It was full of lacy and nylon things. A white slip was neatly folded there, and I picked it up just to hold it. It was time to refold it and put it back into the drawer but instead, I took off my clothes and put on her slip."

At this point, Rene was visibly embarrassed; so was I.

I thought how brave he was spilling his guts to me like this. On one hand, I wished I were someplace else, and on the other, I wanted to hear him out; help him if I could.

As he paused, I volunteered. "It's okay, Rene; tell me about it."

He pursed his lips a little and went on.

"How can I explain it? It was a small thing, but it produced the most ..." he searched for the right word "... formidable feeling I'd ever had. It was the same funny feeling the dreams had produced, but one thousand times more strong. My head was pounding as I stood there.

"All of a sudden, I heard footsteps. I wanted to take off the slip, but it was too late. Mama walked into the room and saw me, standing there with the red face in my sister's slip. She was very angry. I don't remember her exact words, but she made me feel even more ashamed than I already felt. She told me that what I had done was a sin

against God and the Virgin Mary, and never to do anything like it again. I vowed that I would not. We never spoke of it after that time, and I believe that she has told no one to this day, not even my father.

“That Wednesday night when Jenny told us her story, I thought of how lucky she was to have parents who were enlightened enough to stand by her and to try and understand, even though it was difficult for them. My parents are good people and they love me and Marie very much, but they are, unfortunately, of the old school and have little tolerance for anything which is the least unusual.

“After that, the strange dreams stopped, but I thought about being a girl every night before I went to sleep. These were wonderful thoughts to me, yet things that I'm certain girls take for granted. But true to my vow, I never again wore feminine clothes. After a couple of years, I started to make friends and to date girls; I had no romantic feelings about boys. I put the slip episode and my fantasies into a little room and closed the door, suppressing even the recollection from my mind. I was completely normal, just like every other guy.”

He said the last in a wry tone of voice.

“Then, all those years later, that night when Vonnie showed us the pictures, it came back to me like a clap of thunder.” (Rene was very graphic.) “The first and the last - the `elf' and Jenny, the teenager - were me. Jenny was what I might have been, and the `elf', what I still could be. I saw in them both a total acceptance of who they were. They had no apologies to anyone, and they were happy with themselves. I knew that my suppression had accomplished only cutting away a part of myself. At that moment, I knew that I must open the door I'd kept locked so tightly for all those years. I don't know any better now than when I last saw you where this is going. But of one thing I am sure, Joe. I will never close that door again.”

Rene had finished and I was wasted.

I felt like I'd been through the academy obstacle course ten times without a break. I just sat there. We both did - in complete silence. Everything made sense and nothing made sense. I was beginning to see what Rene had meant about the Russian boxes. I started the car and drove us back to the station. I told him about my conversation with Mike and how he was going to terminate the program. Rene just gave a very Gallic shrug of the shoulders and said it didn't matter. I mumbled something about hanging in with him no matter what, and that he could count on me. I meant it, and I think he knew I did, although I'm afraid I wasn't very articulate expressing it.

Help?

I wanted more than anything else at that moment to help Rene put this thing behind him and get on with his life. I decided to call Vonnie that night and asked if I could see her. I guess she sensed it was important and told me to come on over.

Vonnie met me at the door and ushered me through the den into an office. On my way through the den, she introduced me to her husband, a guy as big as Cliff.

She offered me coffee which I accepted. When she came back with it, I could tell it was the same coffee she had served that Wednesday evening when we'd heard Jenny tell her story.

It was a lot better than the mud I made at home.

I didn't want to tell her more than I had to, and had absolutely no intention of disclosing Rene's confidences of that afternoon. I wanted to see what she knew and what should be done about it. I figured this was her business after all and, if anyone would know how to handle this, she would.

We both shadow boxed for a while, neither wanting to divulge what the other didn't already know. We spoke in abstract terms about gender dysphoria, but we both knew we were talking about Rene. The bottom line was, she wasn't a whole lot of help. She told me they weren't sure how guys got that way, although they had some theories, the most widely-accepted of which posited that there was a hormone imbalance in the mother during a time when the fetus is developing its gender imprint. She felt Jenny fell into this category.

She also told me that in those cases, it wasn't so much a question of cure as one of "personality integration".

I thought of Rene's references to the locked room and cutting out a piece of himself.

She wound up telling me that if one had a dysphoric friend, about all one could do was to be supportive.

I thanked her for her time and said goodnight.

She hadn't told me a whole lot I didn't already know.

CHAPTER FOUR

Back in Business

The next day, I saw Mike and told him to go ahead and terminate the program, but I didn't see that it would make any difference.

There wasn't anything overt, but a couple of the guys, especially Pat and, to a lesser degree, Cliff weren't as friendly to Rene as they'd been in the past.

I know this bothered Rene, but he never complained, at least not to me. Other than that, everyone seemed to accept the changes that had taken place and Rene was just as well liked as he'd always been. It took a while, but I too became accustomed to the "new Rene".

I settled back into the day-to-day routine of investigative work - FI's, stakeouts, paperwork, an occasional arrest, and more paperwork. Everything went on more or less as it had before. I guess Mike's dad was right. We're not so different from those lobsters. You get used to things.

It was the second week in June when the beach rapist hit again. I was in the sack on a Sunday morning when my phone rang; it was a little after 2.

I picked up the receiver and heard Mike's voice on the other end.

"Joe, John Kelly just called me. There's been a two-sixty-one down by the pier. Looks like our boy's back at it again. We've got a couple of units on the scene. I want you and Rene to go down there and get filled in. Like before, this is top priority."

John Kelly was the third shift Watch Commander. He, like his counterparts, had standing orders to call Mike whenever something heavy went down, no matter what time it was.

I called Rene, and in ten minutes, we were hauling ass down to the pier, code three.

There were two units on the scene along with an SCFD pulmotor truck. A third black-and-white pulled in just behind us. There was one uniformed officer there talking to several kids.

We picked up the basic details.

The victim's name was Virginia Heath: white female; age 17 years; a local kid. She'd been at a beach party with her boyfriend and two other couples. She and the boy had a spat and she proceeded alone to the vicinity of the pier; the rest of her party remained by their fire, a good 700 yards south of the pier, below the boardwalk area.

She'd been gone for about fifteen minutes when the boy and a friend went to look for her at around 1:20. They found her prone in an area just south of the pier, visibly battered and moaning. They ran up to the Slumber Inn, about 200 yards away, and put in the call from there. The call was logged at 1:53.

It was the same MO as before. She was hit from behind, beaten, and raped. The injuries appeared serious; an ambulance had taken her to SC General before Rene and I arrived on the scene.

Jane Brock, who was taking the statements, told us three other officers were scouring the area on foot. She pointed out the boyfriend to us.

Poor kid was standing there in cutoffs and sweatshirt, shaking and sobbing.

I asked Jane to keep the kids there `till we got back, and Rene and I went to help the other officers on the scene search the area.

We returned about a half hour later. The assailant was long gone. The kids were still standing there, more or less in a state of shock. By this time, there was a small crowd of onlookers, most, I figured, from nearby motels.

We went over to interview the boyfriend; Rene did the talking. We spent only ten minutes with him. We'd get the full story when we read over the incident report on Monday. As we walked away, the boy was sniffing but wasn't shaking as bad as he had been. We shot over to the hospital to see the victim.

There were four people in the waiting area: a man in his late forties, a woman, somewhat younger, presumably his wife, and a boy of twelve or so. An SCPD officer was there talking to the man. The boy and woman were sitting down; their red faces showed they'd been crying.

We said "Hi" to the officer and went straight to the desk where a nurse was seated.

She looked up, and greeted Rene.

I didn't know her.

Rene asked if we could see the victim and she said she'd check. She came back and told us that they had just finished a general examination and were patching her up.

We'd be able to see her in just a few minutes. She advised us that the girl was in stable condition.

We walked over to the others.

The patrolman introduced us to the girl's parents and little brother.

We repeated what the nurse had told us, although I'm sure they overheard.

Rene explained that the worst was over and that their daughter would need their support to deal with the emotional trauma she'd experienced. He then told them how important it was for us to speak to the girl right away. Assuring them of our sensitivity to her condition and that we'd be as brief as possible, he asked their permission to conduct the interview before they went in to see her. They agreed without hesitation. Nice folks.

Soon, a second nurse appeared and told us that we could see Virginia. We followed her down the hall into one of the trauma rooms. I've been at SC General emergency a hundred times, but I never get used to it.

The girl was flat on her back in some sort of traction. Her face was puffed and lividity showed from under the bandages which all but obscured what must normally have been a pretty face. She had a shiner on her right eye, and she was missing a tooth. That's what showed. I couldn't help but picture her folks coming in and seeing her like this.

I've always prided myself on being a professional cop. You don't want a surgeon who faints at the sight of blood, and you don't want a cop who can't handle violence. In spite of all that, I felt a rage deep in the pit of my gut at that moment stronger than anything I've felt before or since.

We spent only a few minutes with her.

She was hard to understand due to the combination of puffy lips and medication. We got enough to know that she never saw the guy that hit her. She said she felt ashamed and dirty.

Rene held her hand and told her she had nothing to feel ashamed about. He asked her if she'd be willing to testify *when* (not if) we nailed the perpetrator. She said, "Yes."

As we walked to the car, I told Rene what I'd do to the guy if I ever got my hands on him. Rene was walking ahead of me kind of fast. He didn't say a word; just nodded his head.

Monday, we ran fresh NCIC and CII checks on the suspect's MO, and contacted neighboring jurisdictions to see what they had. There were several hits, but most of the close ones were either in the can or accounted for. There were a couple that merited follow-up and we stuck them in the case folder. Needless to say, we revived the decoy program.

I went to pick Rene up at 2200 that night. Annette met me at the door and invited me in, saying Rene would be out in a minute. She'd barely finished when Rene came into the living room where we were standing.

At first, I thought it was someone else. Although I was by now used to the feminine aura that Rene exuded, this was the first time I'd seen him in women's clothes since our decoy days. He was dressed simply - a pink tank top, jeans skirt, bare legs, sneakers, and a small leather bag where he must have had his service revolver. He had on pink lipstick and some mascara. That was about the extent of it, but he was a knock-out!

"Do you think he'll pass, Joe?" Annette asked.

She had to be kidding!

I paused as though mulling it over, and replied, "maybe, as long as nobody gets too close."

Rene gave his wife a peck on the cheek and we headed out to the beach.

I don't know what I expected. I guess I was hoping we'd get lucky, but I've been a cop long enough to know that there's no such thing as an easy case.

We spent four hours at the beach - Rene walking and me parking my butt at various pre-arranged spots as he moved. We covered a loop which extended from a point 700 yards below the pier (about where the kids had been) to approximately 300 yards north of the pier.

Rene walked up along the shoreline, then back via the sidewalk which fronted the beach. He'd reverse the loop every other time. We communicated via hand-holds, Rene checking in every five minutes or so.

At the end of each loop, Rene would walk east, perpendicular to the beach and meet me in the car at a spot two blocks up, where we'd sit for fifteen minutes and yak.

That first night, I told Rene that he looked great.

This seemed to embarrass him, but he wasn't angry. He just said, "Thanks," and we talked about other things.

We went on like that for the rest of the week.

Friday night started out with the promise of a little more excite-



ment, as the weekend crowds were at the boardwalk raising hell and generally having a good time.

Rene called it "Passing Go" each time he completed a loop. He'd "Passed Go" three times when we decided to allow some time for the crowds to thin out before resuming.

At midnight, Rene re-embarked, complaining that his feet were beginning to hurt. I would've switched places with him, but that wouldn't have worked at all. My last station was at the base of the pier, in a space between two restaurants. It was 1:35 and I was standing there as I saw Rene down near the water's edge. The tedium of the patrol was starting to get to me. By this time, the few people who remained in the vicinity were down at the boardwalk; the pier area was deserted.

Since I was a kid, I've always been nuts about the ocean. I love the fresh, honest smell of mingled saltwater, fish, and seaweed, and the unrelenting sound of falling surf. Summers, when I was a teenager, I worked on board a sport fishing boat chumming, filling bait tanks, and telling the customers how deep to fish their rigs. I wondered why I'd become a cop instead of being a sailor or commercial fisherman.

I was startled out of my daydream by a sound to my right, but it was only Garfield climbing out of a garbage can.

I checked my watch, and was alarmed to realize that it had been eleven minutes since Rene had last checked in. I mentally charted the last eleven minutes. When I last heard from him, he was about 100 yards south. Did I see him walking back? I didn't. He had to be somewhere between the area just below the pier and the cliff north of the Slumber Inn.

I climbed over a guard rail and jumped to the sand ten feet below. I'd done jumps like that before with no trouble, but I must've been out of shape. I felt a sharp pain go from my right knee all the way up to my hip as I landed. I forgot the pain.

I started running a zigzag pattern beginning below the pier. There was no moon and the only light came from the floods at the Slumber Inn parking lot, so it was pretty dark under the pier.

I heard some scuffling just ahead, still under the pier but closer to the water. At first I couldn't make out what was going on. Then, as I got closer, I could see two people engaged in a struggle; the larger of the two had the other one from behind.

I was going full speed when I hit the bad guy from the left side. I heard the wind go out of him as he let go of Rene.

My two-way sailed into a piling and, from the sound it made, I figured it was a candidate for retirement from active service.

I hit the guy so hard that I toppled over him, but I rolled back and grabbed an arm and a handful of shirt and put myself on top, pinning his arms to the sand under my knees.

I must've whacked him pretty good.

I only recall Rene tugging at me, yelling that I was going to kill him. If Rene hadn't stopped me, I sure as hell would have. The way it turned out, I should have! Due to lack of evidence and eyewitness identification, all we could get the scum for was as-

sault on Rene. He was convicted and sentenced for ten years. I wish they'd thrown away the key.

Rene had been shaken up but wasn't hurt; and, aside from a limp which lasted the week, it looked like I was going to live.

I picked Rene up Monday morning.

When we walked in the front door, we were given a hero's reception. Hell, they even cheered. To say that Mike was happy would be an understatement. He slapped us both on the back and gave each of us a cigar like he'd had a kid or something. Good cigars, too. I got to smoke both of them.

After congratulating us on nailing the bastard, Pat kind of made it up to Rene by laying one of his terrible jokes on him. He says, "hey, Frenchie, did you hear about the guy that's hitting the supermarkets?"

Rene says, "No?"

Pat picks up on the straight line. "He's been crushing boxes of Rice Krispies and Corn Flakes by the hundreds."

"No kidding?" says Rene.

"Yeah," responds Pat, already starting to grin. "The guy's a 'cereal killer'."

Rene groans, but I can tell he's pleased at Pat warming back up to him.

Meanwhile, Pat's turning beet-red, laughing uncontrollably at his own joke. What a nut!

Mike, Cliff, Pat, and Vick Corso took us both to lunch at a fancy Mexican place in town. We had Margaritas and must've spent the better part of two and a half hours just generally having a great time.

Whenever I get to feeling bad, I remember that day, and I feel better.

The Fourth

I mentioned at the beginning of the story our annual Fourth of July barbecue. This year's was special for me. It's funny how some innocent event can change the course of your life. The bash was always held down at the beach. With most of the calls for service originating in that area, we were able to leave a skeleton crew on duty at the station that day and, because it spanned two shifts, everybody got to come.

The thing officially started at 11:00; I was there early, and got into a pickup basketball game with Pat, Vick, and couple of guys from patrol. As I recall, the *skins* (my team) got beat pretty good. The *shirts* had a ringer, a rookie who was 6'5" and had played college ball at UCSC. The guy could not miss from anywhere on the court. By the end of the game, I was ready to stop although the others wanted to go for another.

There was a kind of stage where the boardwalk opened onto the public beach.

It was right near there that I saw Rene and Annette laying out their blanket. I ran down to the water and freshened up, then went over to join them. Annette had started reading a novel. Rene pulled out a deck of cards and we played some Gin Rummy.

We hadn't been there fifteen minutes when who should walk over but good old Vonnie. She was standing between us and the sun so I couldn't really make her out very well; I only knew it was her by her voice. She had another lady with her, but I couldn't make her out any better than I could Vonnie. She introduced her friend as Kim Baker and asked if they could sit down.

I told them to pull up a sand dune and make themselves comfortable. As they got seated, I recognized Kim as the “elf” of silent screen fame.

Now, I've always prided myself at never being at a loss for words, but at that moment I was stone dumb. There she was, right across the blanket from me, smiling that killer smile while I felt my insides stage a civil war. I don't think Vonnie and Annette were aware of my discomfort, but I knew Rene was. You're not partners for as long as Rene and I'd been without developing an almost uncanny sense of what the other guy's thinking.

Everybody but me was engaged in brilliant conversation while I just sat and stared with what I'm sure was a stupid grin.

Then, out of nowhere, Rene announces to Kim that I'd “christened” her “the elf”. I coulda killed him!

Kim smiled at me and said that was cute. At this point, Vonnie took the heat off me by excusing herself to join Chief Edwards and his wife. She left Kim with us.

Finally, I found my tongue and was able to speak. Wisely, I stuck to words of one syllable and tried to stay on the interrogative end of the conversation.

Kim was an interesting person. She lived in Monterey, where she worked as a guide at the aquarium. She'd met Vonnie several years ago when she'd sought counseling in another incarnation. We got along great. Once I got over my shaky knees, I found Kim easy to be with and fun to talk to. Annette, Rene, Kim, and I were a foursome for the rest of the day.

We were hungry, so Rene and I volunteered to grab some hot dogs and drinks at the boardwalk while Kim and Annette stayed behind.

When we were about thirty yards away from the ladies, Rene asked me how I liked Kim, as if he didn't know.

A year ago, I'd have been keeping arm's length from anybody whose gender and sex weren't in perfect alignment but, thanks to Rene, all that had changed.

I told Rene I liked her fine and asked him why he'd let the elf business out of the bag.

He responded that he didn't want to see me tongue tied for the rest of the day, and so decided to blast me out of my trance. I shoved him.

When we got to the hot dog stand, the kid serving the food asked Rene what he wanted, addressing him as `Miss'.

By this time, I was used to Rene being taken for a girl. His figure had continued to develop, as had the softness of his skin and face. He still didn't dress up. He didn't need to.

As we neared the blanket, Annette and Kim abruptly stopped whatever they'd been giggling about and started fussing, straightening the blanket and moving things from point-A to point-B. I never knew for sure when women did that whether they'd been talking about you or you were just supposed to think they had been. Would they do it if they knew how off-balance it makes a guy feel? I got a hundred bucks says they would.

I don't think I've ever had a better time than that Fourth of July, 1989. It was like a beer commercial. A bunch of friends having a good time. I didn't think much about the past or the future - what could happen, what might happen. I just enjoyed myself like I was a kid.

After lunch, we all played cards for a while, then Kim suggested we go to the boardwalk and ride the merry-go-round, which everyone agreed was a great idea. By the time we staggered off our third merry-go-round ride, the volleyball game was forming, and we joined in. By dinner time, we'd all worked up a major hunger. I demolished a hamburger and a plate of ribs, plus some salad and fries.

The others had prawns and salad, and taunted me that I didn't know what I was missing.

My response was that I was eating, "real food for real people," which got a laugh.

Once dinner was out of the way, the four of us decided to do bumper cars. Kim and I took one car and Annette and Rene, another. We were supposed to be going in the same, counterclockwise direction, but I didn't see how you could have any fun that way, so I spun our vehicle around and floored it, reaching the dizzying speed of 2 miles an hour.

I sought out Rene and Annette. Kim screamed as I closed in for the kill. At the last second, Rene made an abrupt turn and I bounced harmlessly off into a couple of Chicano guys, who I think took the contact as an affront to their masculinity. I shrugged, smiled, and mumbled, "Madre de Dios," and Kim gave my ribs a good poke with her elbow.

We pried ourselves out of the bumper cars and were soon back in the middle of the crowd.

Over the loudspeakers, they announced that it was time for the annual *Miss Boardwalk* contest. Last year one of our rookies, Sandy Ford, had won the title. It was a department tradition that a couple of the guys - usually ready for anything after several beers - would enter, to the delight of both our group and the citizens who were present in large numbers.

I figured this was my chance to get back at Rene, and challenged, "Frenchie, why don't you enter this year?"

Rene gave me a dirty look and replied that he didn't have the required bathing suit. Annette wasn't about to let him off and, with a conspiratorial wink at me, told him to pick up a suit at Neal's surf shop down the street.

Rene was trying to think up an answer to that one when Kim looks him in the eye and says, "Go for it, Rene."

That did it. Kim - possibly because of all the two of them shared - seemed to have considerable influence over him. Rene made a very French grimace-grin and took off for Neal's.

Twenty minutes had passed and the crowd began to assemble in front of the stage where the contest was to be held. We joined them and kept looking anxiously for some sign of Rene.

I was starting to worry that he'd chickened out, when I spotted him in a group of people, headed for the assembly area behind the stage. I only caught a glimpse of him before he disappeared.

He was still wearing his cutoffs and shirt. He either had the swim suit on under his clothes or he was carrying it.

I won't bore you with a lot of details. There were about a dozen gals in the lineup plus three guys, one of which was none other than our own Vick Corso. He was normally a shy kid, so I figured he must have had his fair share of beer that afternoon. The crowd made cat calls and whistles at the guys, and applauded in varying degrees for each of the ladies as it was her turn to join the growing line on stage.

When the announcer called Rene's name, Rene walked out standing tall and proud. He looked great.

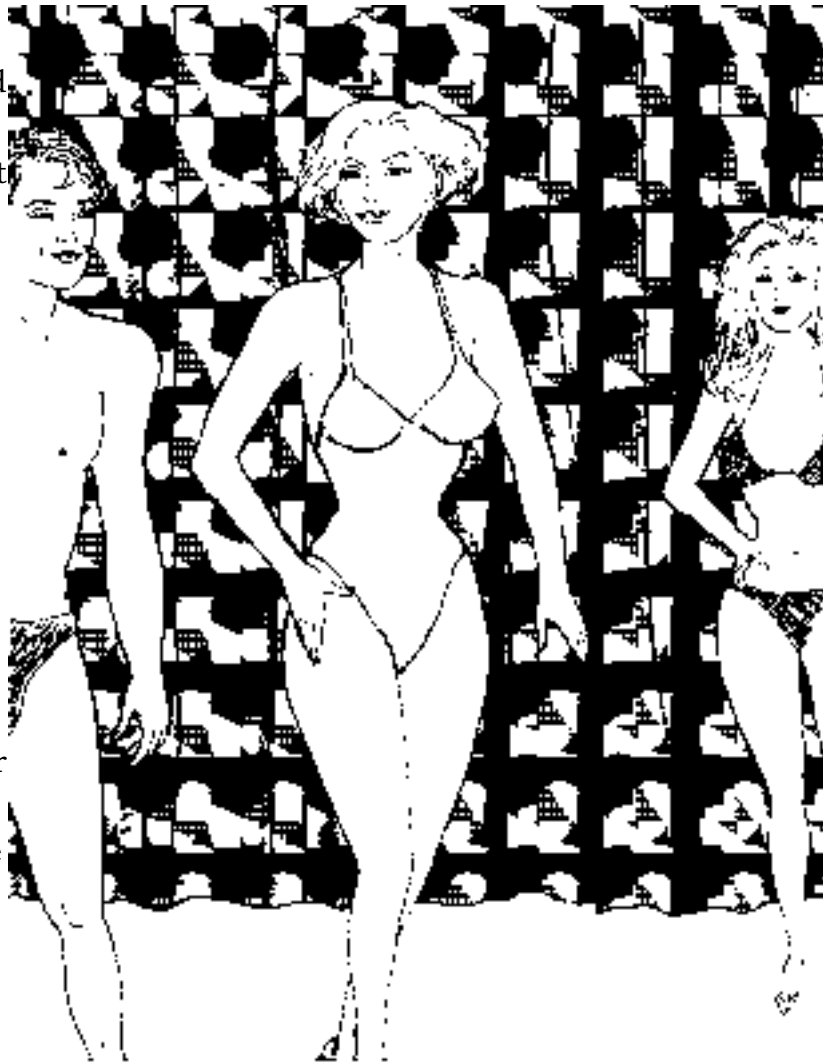
I hadn't realized fully up to that point how ladylike his figure had become. The one-piece white suit had a low-cut back and thin straps, and revealed a modest but feminine bust line, small waist, and softly-rounded hips.

The time finally came for the judges to cast their votes and announce their selection. When Rene's name was announced as the second runner up, the SCPD section went wild, and when they declared the winner, Rene and the first runner up jumped up and down, and hugged both each other and the new Miss Boardwalk.

Of course, we all thought Rene should have won.

When Rene came down to join us, he was absolutely beaming.

Later, we all sat back down on the blanket and watched the fire-



works explode in a breathtaking display over the water. It was something to see. Kim and I held hands. I've been with my share of women - from one-night stands to serious relationships - but the warmth from our hands touching that night gave me a feeling I hadn't had since I was twelve.

It was one hell of a Fourth of July.

CHAPTER FIVE: A Whole Lot of Shakin'

After the Fourth, things didn't go well for Rene. In late August, I could tell something was bothering him. I didn't bug him about it. I knew if it was something he wanted to share, he'd let me in on it in his own time. A few days after I first noticed his change in attitude, he opened up. We were on our way somewhere in my car when he told me that he and Annette were separated. If I hadn't known better, I would have been surprised, because I don't think I've ever known a better-matched couple.

I asked him what had happened and he kind of let his hair down.

"It's very simple, Joe. She just can't handle the situation any longer. Although we love each other very much, we no longer make love together. We haven't for several months now. She says it's like making love to another woman."

Rene was having a hard time with this, but all I could do was to listen.

I encouraged him to go on and he did.

"There is no rancor between us and we are still the best of friends, but I am afraid that our love relationship is history. I'm living at the Palm Grove motel on Ocean until I can find someplace more permanent."

I offered to let him move in with me for as long as he wanted, but he demurred. I think he didn't want to put me in an awkward position.

Rene wasn't the first cop I'd known who'd gotten split up from his wife. It was common. I don't know why I felt so bad about it, but I did. Normally, I'm kind of a happy-go-lucky nut but I gotta admit this had me depressed.

Earthquake!

I'll never forget October 17, 1989. I don't suppose anybody who was in Northern California on that day will. It was a Tuesday and I was using some comp time to take advantage of an opportunity to see the A's play in the World Series at "The Stick", as we call Candlestick Park.

Kim went with me to the game. We'd seen each other a couple of times since the fourth. Nothing serious at that point - we just enjoyed each other's company. The weather was beautiful and we were settling into the game when it hit. At first, I thought a truck had crashed into the stands, then I saw the whole place rolling like it was on water.

It shook everyone up pretty good but no serious damage was done - at the park, that is. I think for a few minutes they even considered going on with the game but, of course, that was out of the question.

We decided that it would be best to get back to Santa Cruz as quick as we could.

I had no immediate knowledge of the extent of damage or even where the epicenter was, but if Santa Cruz had been hit, I'd be needed.

I checked in with the Daly City PD to determine whether 92 was open (I figured that would be the best way back) but they didn't know zip. Everything was in a state of confusion. I decided to take 92 anyhow.

Finally we made it back.

Kim insisted on coming with me to headquarters and offering whatever assistance she could.

I won't go into the next 24 hours; suffice it to say that things were a real mess. Santa Cruz had been hit bad alright. There were a lot of old unreinforced brick structures in oldtown which got the worst of it.

It was Friday morning before I learned that Rene was in the hospital.

Pat filled me in as best he could.

Rene had been in town when it hit. He was doing a background check out a CCW (concealed weapon) permit request at the time - a real routine assignment.

Pat said he understood that Rene had gone into one of the buildings and pulled out an eight year old kid who was pinned under a display case. He went in again, I suppose to help somebody or maybe just to see if there was anybody else in trouble. Anyhow, while he was in there, a wall gave way and fell on him. He was under a pile of bricks for over a quarter hour before they got him out.

I made it to SC General in record time.

When I got there, it was a state of complete disorder. It looked to me like every doctor, nurse, and staff person they had was on duty. Judging from the shadows on the faces of the guys, they'd been putting in some long hours. I checked admitting and, after a little delay, found out Rene's room number.

I saw a nurse coming out of his room and asked her how he was doing. A wave of relief swept over me as I learned he'd suffered only a concussion, two broken ribs, and a cracked tibia.

When I entered the room, it sounded like a United Nations conference. His folks, his sister, and her husband were in there with him, all babbling in French.

They all turned to look at me when I came in, so I said, "Bonjour", which turned out to be a big mistake, as Rene's dad then directed a barrage of frog on me.

Rene laughed and then said something in French, which made the rest of them laugh.

I joined in, not wanting to be left out, which made them laugh all the harder.

Rene introduced me to his family. Funny, in all the time I'd known him, I hadn't met them before this. I kidded Rene how he'd do anything to get a few paid days off, to which he responded that next time he'd figure out an easier way. In about fifteen minutes, a nurse came in with a tray full of needles and made us all leave.

On the way out, I shot back over my shoulder, "Hey Rene, have fun," while eyeing the tray.

Rene made a face at me.

I don't think I've ever been more tired than I was driving back to the station after that visit. Like everybody else, I hadn't gotten but a few hours sleep. I also felt like 500 pounds had been taken off my back. At just after 1700 things had calmed down enough so I was able to split for a late snack and cop some Z's back at the ranch.

A Sea Change

It took a few weeks, but things finally got back to normal. Demolition was just about finished on the seriously-damaged structures in old town, the news media were nowhere to be seen, and people now spoke of something other than, "the big one".

Rene was released from the hospital on the first of November. He received a special commendation for rescuing the kid and was on the 11 o'clock news. The next day, a Thursday, he was back at work.

Vick had done a great job filling in for Rene, which meant that our paperwork was kept neat, accurate, and up-to-date. Vick split to conduct a group of high-school kids on a tour of the facilities, which left me and Rene alone to catch a bite.

We took our lunch break at the Union Pacific Diner - the same place we'd eaten on the day of the stakeout.

After ordering, I found the time to take my first good look at Rene since visiting him at the hospital. He looked better than he had since he and Annette had broken up. He'd lost a little weight, but he had good color and, I don't know, his face seemed to have a kind of glow. He was obviously happier than he'd been for a long time.

"You're looking great, Rene. Think I'll bust some ribs if that's what it does for you," I quipped.

I could tell by his expression that he was pleased.

"Thanks Joe. I guess the time off did me good. I don't think I've ever felt better - physically or emotionally. When Annette left me, I felt as though I'd hit bottom. In fact, I guess I had. But a funny thing happens at times like that; you discover inner resources you never knew you had. I've found a really cute little apartment out near the point where I can see and hear the ocean. I love it. Mike's given me two weeks of paid leave. If you don't mind, I'd like to take it and do some thinking and perhaps a little decorating. The place is so bare it makes me feel I'm still in the hospital."

"Hell yes, Rene. Do it. You've earned the time off. Vick will fill in for you while you're out."

"You're a good friend, Joe." Rene smiled.

I grinned back.

We ate the rest of the meal without saying much.

I guess I was lulled into thinking that everything would be pretty much the same, but it wasn't. Oh, I continued to work cases and catch bad guys alright, but I was in for a shock.

I wasn't watching the calendar real close and the two weeks of Rene's leave just kind of snuck by.

It was Saturday and I'd been out fishing on Gus Black's 23-footer. It was a dumb day to be out, and we should have known better. We were off shore about a mile and half and almost got caught in a squall. As luck would have it, we had a chance to wet our lines before it hit, and we caught some flounder and a couple of snappers. It was just before noon when I got home, and the rain was coming down in sheets.

My machine had two messages on it.

The first was some woman wanting to sell me life insurance and the second was Rene; he left his new number.

Rene picked up on the second ring.

“Hi Joe, thanks for returning my call. If you're not busy today, I thought you might like to come over and see my new place. I've got some beer in the fridge and I'll fix a snack.”

The fact is that I'd planned to kill the day fishing anyway, so I had nothing else to do. Besides, I was curious about Rene's new place and was looking forward to seeing my partner again. I said sure and that I'd be right over. I took one of the flounders out of the refrigerator and wrapped it in the fashion section of the Saturday paper. I knew Rene liked fish and figured he'd get a couple of meals out of this baby.

I was already in the car before the thought struck me that I should bring some sort of housewarming gift - in addition to the fish, that is. I stopped off at a touristy shopping center in the marina not a half-mile from Rene's new place and went into the first gift shop I saw. My eye was caught by several sea mammals done in some sort of porcelain and mounted on a burly, oil-finished, wood base. The whales were of course the largest and, at \$75, a little on the pricey side. On the other hand, the smaller ones, mainly sea birds, weren't quite up to the occasion.

I settled on a dolphin which set me back \$50, but what the hell.

The counter was manned by a teenage kid of indeterminate gender with spiked purple hair and a sweat shirt emblazoned on the front with the picture of a large and theatrically menacing white shark. Nice touch!

I asked him/her if I could get it wrapped, hopefully sometime in the present century, as it was a gift. I was given a typical smartass kid look as the person stated the obvious fact that all they sold there were gifts. S/he put it into a box, saying they didn't stock wrapping paper.

There were five apartments - three on street level and two above - finished in bleached cedar siding and serviced by a slat-wood walk; very beach front. Rene's was one of two top units. I sloshed up the steps and called through the partly-open door. I heard Rene's voice from inside.

“Come on in Joe, I'm in the kitchen.”

I came in off the deck landing into a hallway. To the left was the living room, which boasted an unobstructed view of Monterey bay through a large picture window. There was also a porthole type window facing north. The place looked great.

I got to admit, I was surprised; at that point, I was expecting to see a lot of lace and frills. In fact, the decor was tasteful and subdued - a comfortable mix of cane and driftwood.

Something about the look of the place conveyed the message that Rene was getting it together. I looked out the window at the rain and sea - a scene I'd witnessed a thousand times, but one which still held a primal fascination for me.

Rene's voice behind me gently broke the spell.

"Hey, what's in the box, guy?"

"Just something for your ..." my words were interrupted by what I saw when I turned around.

It's not that Rene looked all that different from before, but, where he'd been on one side of a line the last time I'd seen him, she was now on the other.

Rene's hair, still short, was "done" in a kind of Pixie style. She was made up lightly with a hint of eye shadow, a touch of mascara, and some pale pink lipstick. A pair of small turquoise and silver earrings adorned her obviously-pierced ears. She had on a simple boat-neck sweater and jeans. Rene stood there with a hand on one hip and an impish grin as I floundered for words.

"Uh, I got this for your new place," I mumbled, proffering the white box with the dolphin.

A silver sticker bonded a small envelope bearing Rene's name to the box lid.

"Oh Joe, how sweet! But, you've misspelled my name. There are two of the letter 'e' at the end now."

"I thought there was just one 'e' at the end," I countered. I was trying to find a mental foothold, but none was forthcoming. I coulda strangled her! I'm trying to cope with a world suddenly filled with Cheshire cats and rabbits running around looking at their watches and Rene's spouting French spelling trivia.

Renee fixed my eyes with a determined stare that belied the smile on her lips. "That's changed now, Joe."

We just looked at each other for a few seconds, then spoke at the same time. We laughed.

After an embarrassed pause, I motioned for Renee to talk.

She made a face saying, "Joe, what's that hideous odor? One would say you're wearing 'Eau de Poisson'."

That broke the tension and I laughed for real. I'd totally forgotten the package which I still held clutched in my left hand. I disclosed the contents, explaining that it was freshly-caught.

Renee took it and left for the kitchen. Several seconds later, she reemerged.

"Now let's see what's in the mystery box." she exclaimed.

We both sat down on a rattan sofa and Renee placed the box on the thick glass top of a coffee table supported by three limbs of a large driftwood stump. After opening the box, she removed and admired the dolphin, holding it at arm's length.

“Oh Joe, I love it. Thank you so much. I'll place it right here on the table. It goes well with the room, don't you agree?”

I agreed. I don't always say the right things at the right times, and I don't always buy the most appropriate gifts but, what can I tell you? When you're hot, you're hot.

Renee disappeared into the kitchen to serve lunch as I turned once again to the expanse of ocean always the same and always changing. It struck me at that moment how much life is like the sea - changing while appearing to remain the same. I thought of how people dealt with change - I mean inevitable change.

Some seemed to be constantly in a state of tension, digging their heels in to keep kids from growing up, parents from growing old, lovers from growing out; others accepted the inevitable and were at peace; still others charged out and sought change as eagerly as the crazy surfers below, even on a day like this, pursued the next wave.

I think it was in that instant that my own attitude towards Renee itself changed.

It seemed useless to deny the inevitable course of change in Renee. Hadn't she made her peace with the past and her own destiny?

My reverie was broken by Renee's voice as she placed lunch on the coffee table.

“Yes!” I exclaimed with undisguised enthusiasm as I recognized my favorite meal - tacos, quesadillas, hot sauce, and a large bowl of tortilla chips. Two tall, frosty glasses held what I was willing to bet were Margaritas.

Maybe it was the storm raging outside with its surges of rain driven like buckshot into the window and sides of the apartment, or maybe it came out of my reconciliation with the inevitable, but all of a sudden, I felt really hungry.

We talked during lunch but it wasn't the same now. The easy banter of guys who'd shared everything was gone. Yet, the person sitting next to me was someone I knew and liked. No, someone I loved. I'd loved Renee like a brother, now I wasn't sure how I loved her. Like a sister? I had a brother, but no sister (although I'd always wanted one). Now, in a funny way, perhaps Renee had become the sister I never had.

During the course of our conversation, Renee confided to me that the Wednesday night at Vonnie's when we'd met Jenny had been the turning point for her. Somehow, although their situations had been quite different, there was enough similarity for Renee to confirm the conviction which had been growing in his heart since the night of the slide show.

Renee then told me what I already knew.

“I'm not coming back to SCPD, Joe.”

“I figured as much,” I replied. “What are you going to do?”

Renee tilted her head.

“You won't believe this but I got a job working with computers. Lucy has this friend that runs a software publishing house and he was looking for someone fluent in both

French and English to work on their catalogs and documentation. I went in for an interview and took a kind of test where I rewrote some horrible text so that it made sense. I guess he liked what I did because he hired me on the spot. I'll be making a little more than I was on the force and I won't have to worry about getting shot. I'm going to miss working with you, Joe."

I could tell Renee really meant what she said, but sensed that things were getting a little more serious than I was comfortable with.

"Hey," I enthused, "at least I won't have to put up with the publicity of having a local hero for a partner."

We talked a lot after that.

The conversation became more easy as time went on, as it does with people who've just met and are starting to become comfortable with one another. Finally, I glanced at my watch and was surprised to find that the afternoon had slipped into evening. It was past 6:30 and by now quite dark outside. Sometime during our afternoon the storm had stolen away and the first evening stars were visible.

Renee asked me if I'd like to stick around, but I begged off. I felt like going back to my place, taking off my shoes, and being alone with a bowl of popcorn and a good book.

As I got up, Renee came over and we hugged.

Outside, the air was fresh as it can only be after a storm.

Memories

The last several months are a blur. There've been the usual cases and the usual paperwork, and inexorably the tidal effects of daily routine have worn the edge of my loss of Renee to a fading memory which now surfaces only occasionally.

I haven't seen Renee since that Saturday; I figure I'll see her again sometime.

Vick Corso, who everybody now calls "the kid", is my new partner. We hit it off fine. Vick's a good guy, but he isn't any Renee.

So here I am, cruising down Ocean Boulevard in Kim's Rabbit, half listening to one of her radio stations. I don't fiddle radio dials much - the music was nice so, what the hell?

A song was beginning. It started with banjo strums - plunk, plunk, plunk. No other instruments, just the banjo. It sounded kind of hokey. I don't know why I didn't tune it out but, like I said I don't fiddle dials, so I let it play.

The song didn't get very far before I recognized it.

It was Renee's damn frog and the "rainbow" song.

All at once, I couldn't see real well. Everything was blurring. I had to pull the car over to the side of the road for a while. I don't know why something stupid like that got to me, but as Renee would say it isn't about knowing anyhow, it's about feeling.

Fin