A Short Story

Better Be Ready 'Bout Half Past Eight
by Alison Baker

"I'm changing sex," Zach said.
Byron looked up from his lab notebook. "For the better, I hope."

"This is something I've never discussed with you," Zach said, stepping back and leaning against the office door. "I need to. Do you want to get a beer or something?"

"I have to transcribe this data," Byron said. "What do you need to discuss?"

"My sexuality," Zach said. "The way I feel trapped in the wrong body."

"Well, I suppose you were right," Byron said.
"Right?" Zach said.
"Not to discuss it with me," Byron said. "It's none of my business, is it?"

"We've been friends a long time," Zach said.
"Have you always felt this way?" Byron said.
Zach nodded. "I didn't know it was this I was feeling," he said. "But I've been in therapy for over a year now, and I'm sure."

"You've been seeing Terry about this?"
Byron had given Zach the name of Terry Wu, whom he himself had once consulted professionally.
Zach nodded again.
"He's terrific. He knew the first time he met me what I was."
"What were you?" Byron said.
"A woman," Zach said.

What do you get as a shower present for a man you've known for twenty years—who is celebrating his transformation into a woman?

HAD HE MISSED any signs? Byron sat frowning at the computer screen. Then he stood, shoved his hands into his pockets, and stared out the window. He could see the sky and the top of the snow-covered hills. On this floor all the windows started at chin level, so you couldn't see the parking lot or the ground outside; you could see only distances, clouds, and sections of sunrise.

He walked up and down the hall for a while. The surrounding labs buzzed with action, students leaning intently over whirring equipment, technicians laughing over coffee. Secretaries clumped through the hall and said, "Hi, Dr. Glass," when they passed him. He could ignore them, because he had a reputation for being absentminded; he was absorbed in his research, or perhaps in a new poem. He was well known, particularly in scientific circles, for his poetry. He edited the poetry column of a major scientific research journal. He judged many poetry-writing competitions, and he had edited anthologies.

What had he missed?
Worrying about it was useless. Zach's sexuality wasn't his concern. "Just as long as it doesn't interfere with work," he would say. "I can't have people's personal lives taking over the lab."

But in fact he didn't believe in the separation of work...
and home. "If your love life’s screwed up, you’re probably going to screw up the science," he’d said more than once when he sent a sobbing technician home, or gave a distraught graduate student the name of a counselor. As a result, his workers did sacrifice, to some extent, their personal lives; they came in on weekends or at night to see to an experiment. The dictum, even if artificial, seemed to work.

"Go on home," he imagined himself saying to Zach, patting him on the shoulder. "Come back when it’s all over."

But that wouldn’t work. For one thing, the fretting wouldn’t end. For another thing, Zach wouldn’t be Zach when he came back. He would be a woman Byron had never met.

"**HE’S PUTTING YOU ON,** EMILY SAID. SHE WAS sitting at the table, ostensibly editing a paper on the synthesis of mRNA at the transcriptional level in the Drosophila Per protein, but whenever the spoon Byron held approached Toby’s mouth, her own mouth opened in anticipation.

"**Nope,**" Byron said, spooning more applesauce from the jar. "He wanted to tell me before he started wearing makeup."

"If Zach thinks that’s the definition of women, he’s headed for trouble," Emily said. "I suppose he’s shaving his legs and getting silicone implants too."

"Not to mention waxing his bikini line," Byron said.

"Oh, God," Emily said, laughing. "I don’t want to hear any more." She handed Byron a washcloth, and Byron carefully wiped applesauce off Toby’s chin. "How would you know you were the wrong sex?"

"Woman’s intuition?" Byron said.

**VERY ATTRACTION,** HE SAID THE NEXT MORNING, when Zach walked into the lab wearing eye shadow.

"Don’t make fun of me, okay?" Zach said.

Byron felt embarrassed. "I didn’t mean anything," he said. "I mean, it’s subtle and everything."

Zach looked pleased. "I’ve been practicing," he said. "You know what? My younger brother wears more makeup than I do. Is this a crazy world or what?"

"Yeah," Byron said. He’d met Zach’s brother, whose makeup was usually black. "Are you doing this gradually? Or are you sort of going cold turkey? I mean, will you come in in nylons and spike heels some morning?"

"Babe," Zach said, "I’ve been getting hormones for six months. Don’t you notice anything different?"

He put his hands on his hips and turned slowly around, and Byron saw discernible breasts pushing up the cloth of Zach’s rugby shirt. Byron felt a little faint, but he managed to say, "You’re wearing a bra."

Zach went over to look in the mirror behind the door. He stood on tiptoe, staring intently at his breasts for a moment, and then, as he took his lab coat off the hook, he said, "God, I’m starting to feel good."

"You are?" was all Byron could manage. He was wondering how to say, without hurting Zach’s new feelings, Don’t call me babe.

All day he tried not to look at Zach’s breasts, but there they were, right in front of him, as Zach bent over the bench, or peered into the microscope, or leaned back with his hands behind his neck, staring at the ceiling, thinking.

"I’m heading out," Byron said to Sarah in midafternoon.

"Are you okay?" she said, looking up from the bench. "You look a little peaked."

"I’m fine," Byron said. "I’ll be back in the morning."

But once out in the parking lot, sitting in his car, he could think of no place he wanted to go. He hung on to the steering wheel and stared at the Mercedes in front of him, which had a Utah license plate that read 1MAQT. A woman, of course.

Well, it’s not my life, he thought. Nothing has changed for me.

**I HAVEN’T HAD THIS MUCH TROUBLE WITH BREASTS since I was sixteen,** he said to Emily as they sat at the kitchen table watching the sunset.

"How big are they?" Emily said.

"Jesus, I don’t know," Byron said.

"Bigger than mine?" she said.

Byron looked at Emily’s breasts, which were bigger since she’d had Toby. "No," he said. "But I think they’ve just started."

"You mean he’ll keep taking hormones till they’re the size he wants?" Emily said. "I should do that."

"You know," Byron said, "what I don’t understand is why it bothers me so much. You’d think he’s doing it to spite me."

"Going to meetings will be more expensive," she said.

"What do you mean?" Byron said.

"Honey," Emily said, "if Zach’s a woman, you won’t be sharing a room. Will you?"

"Oh," Byron said. "Do you think it will make that much difference?"

"You’re already obsessed with his breasts," Emily said. "Wait till he’s fully equipped."

Byron leaned his head on his hand. He hadn’t even thought about the surgical procedure.

**I THINK YOU’RE LETTING THIS COME BETWEEN us,** Zach said the next day.

"What?" Byron said.

"We’ve been friends a long time. I don’t want to lose that."

"Zach," Byron said, "I don’t see how things can stay the same."
"But I'm still the same person," Zach said.
Byron was not at all sure of that. "Well, how's it going?" he finally said.
Zach seemed pleased to be asked. He sat down on the desk and folded his arms. "Really well," he said. "The surgeon says the physiological changes are right on schedule. I'm scheduled for surgery starting next month."
"Starting?" Byron said.
"I'm going to have a series of operations," Zach said. "Over several months. Cosmetic surgery for the most part."
"Zach," Byron said, "maybe it's none of my business, but don't you feel—" He cast about for the right way to say it. "Won't the operations make you feel, uh, mutilated?"
Zach shook his head. "That's what it's all about," he said. "They won't. To tell you the truth, in the past year or two I've come to feel as if my penis is an alien growth on my body. It's my enemy, Byron. This surgery's going to liberate me."
Byron crossed his legs. "I don't think I can relate to that," he said.
"I know," Zach said. "My support group says nobody really understands."
"Your support group?" Byron said.
"Women who've had the operation," Zach said, "or are in the process. We meet every week."
"How many are there?"
"More than you'd think," Zach said.
"So," Byron said. "Are you—I mean, should I call you 'she' now?"
Zach grinned. "I've been calling myself 'she' for a while. But so far nobody outside my group has."
"Well," Byron said. He tried to look at Zach and smile, but he couldn't do both at once. He smiled first, and then looked. "I'll work on it," he said. "But it's not exactly easy for me either, you know."
"I know," Zach said. "I really appreciate your trying to understand." He stood up. "Back to work," he said. "Oh." He turned around with his hand on the doorknob. "I'm changing my name, too. As of next month I'll be Zoe."
"Zoe," Byron said.
"It means 'life,'" Zach said. "Mine is finally beginning."
"It means 'life,'" Byron said mingenly to Toby as he pulled the soggy diaper out from under him. "'Life,' for Christ's sake," Toby smiled.
"What's he been for thirty-eight years—dead?" Byron said. He dried Toby and sprinkled him with powder, smoothing it into the soft creases. As he lifted Toby's feet to slide a clean diaper underneath him, a stream of pee arced gracefully into the air and hit Byron in the chest, leaving a trail of droplets across Toby's powdered thighs.
"Oh, geez," Byron said. "Couldn't you wait ten seconds?" He reached for the washcloth and wiped the baby off. Then heiggled the little penis between his thumb and forefinger. "You know what you are, don't you?" he asked, leaning over and peering into Toby's face. "A little man. No question about that."
Toby laughed.
After he'd put Toby into the crib, Byron went into the bathroom, pulling his T-shirt off. He caught sight of himself in the mirror and stood still. With the neckband of the shirt stuck on his head, framing his face, the shirt hung from his head like a wig of green hair.
He took his glasses off to blur the details and moved close to the mirror, looking at the line of his jaw. Was his jaw strong? Some women who had what were called "strong features" were quite attractive. Byron's mother used to say that Emily was built like a football player, but Byron had always thought she was sexy.
He put his glasses on and stepped back, bending his knees so that only his shoulders showed in the glass. With long hair around his face, and a few hormones to change his shape a little, he'd make a terrific woman.
He opened the medicine cabinet and took out one of Emily's lipsticks. He leaned forward and spread it on his mouth, and as he pressed his lips together, a woman's face materialized in the mirror. Byron's heart came to a standstill.
It was his mother.

I t was the weirdest thing," he said. "I never looked like her before. Never."
"You never cross-dressed before," Zach said, continuing to stare at the computer screen.
"What's going on with this data?"
"Of course I never cross-dressed," Byron said. "I still don't cross-dress. I just happened to look in the mirror when my shirt was on my head."
Zach looked up at him and grinned. "And there she was," he said. "You would be amazed what we find out about ourselves when we come to terms with our sexuality."
"Oh, for God's sake," Byron said. "I was taking my shirt off. I wasn't coming to terms with anything."
"That's fairly obvious," Zach said, tapping at the keyboard.
"Jesus!" Byron said. "Do those hormones come complete with hitches or is your period starting?"
Zach stared at him. "I can't believe you said that," he said.
Byron couldn't believe he'd said it either, but he went on. "Everything's sexuality with you these days," he said crossly. "I'm trying to tell you about my mother and you tell me it's my goddamn sexuality."
Zach stood up and stepped away from the desk. "Look," he said, folding his arms, "it's called the Tiresias
syndrome. You're jealous because I understand both sexes. By cross-dressing—whether you go around in Emily's underwear or just pretend you've got a wig on—you're trying to identify with me."

"What?" he finally said.

"You can't handle talking about the things that really matter, can you?" Zach said. "As soon as we get close to personal feelings, you back off."

"Feelings," Byron said.

"You're a typical man when it comes to emotions," Zach said.

"And you're a typical woman," Byron said.

Zach shook his head. "You are in trouble, boy."

"I'm in trouble?" Byron said. "Looks to me like you're the one with the problem."

"That's the difference between us," Zach said. "I'm taking steps to correct my problem. You won't even admit yours."

"My problem is you," Byron said. "You are a fucking prick."

"Not for long," Zach said.

"Once a prick, always a prick," Byron shouted.

After Zach walked out the door, Byron sat down at his desk and stared at the data Zach had pulled up on the screen, but its sense eluded him. Finally he spun his chair around and put his feet up on the bookcase behind him, and reached for a legal pad.

He always wrote his poetry on long yellow legal pads. He had once tried to jot down some poetic thoughts on the computer, but they had slipped out of his poem and insinuated themselves into a new idea for a research project, which in fact developed into a grant proposal that was later funded. The experience had scared him.

He stared up at the slice of sky that was visible from where he sat, and held the legal pad on his lap for more than an hour, during which time he wrote down thirteen words. When Sarah stuck her head into the office and said, "See you tomorrow," he put the pad down and left work for the day.

Driving home, he thought about his dead mother, Melba Glass. She had never liked Emily, but once Byron was married, his mother stopped saying snide things about her. She asked them instead. "Honey," she'd say, "isn't Emily a little strident?"

"What do you mean, 'strident'?" Byron would snarl, and she would say she'd meant nothing at all, really, young women were just different these days. Byron would narrow his eyes at her, but later, when he'd driven his mother to the train station and waved her off, the idea would come back to him. Emily was vociferous in her opinions. And not particularly tolerant of her mother-in-law's old-fashioned tendencies.

"Why doesn't your mother drive?" she'd say.

"Why should she?" he'd say. "She never needed to."

"She needs to now, doesn't she?" Emily would say. "Why should she?" Byron would repeat, and for a couple of days he would react to everything Emily said as if she were being highly unreasonable, and strident.

What would Emily say if he told her that his dead mother had appeared to him? Worse, that he had appeared to himself as his dead mother?

Emily would lean over Toby's crib in the dark. "I'll be Don Ameche in a taxi, honey," she'd sing. "Better be ready 'bout half past eight."

"How are you 'three of you now, ha!'" Terry Wu said.

"Three of me?" Byron said.

"You have a little baby?" Terry said.

"Oh! Toby! Terrific! And Emily. I see. Sure, we're fine. Really. Everything's terrific."

A concerned look seized Terry Wu's face. "Do you protest too much?" he said, and he leaned forward, pressing his fingertips together.

"Protest?" Byron said. "That's not why I'm here.

"Maybe no, maybe yes," Terry said, but he leaned back again.

"No, it's mv, uh, colleague. You know, Zach."

"Ah," Terry said.

"I seem obsessed," Byron said weakly.

"You are obsessed with your colleague?"

"With his sex," Byron said.

"His sex?" Terry said.

Byron felt himself blushing. "I can't get used to the idea that he's a woman."

Terry nodded again. "Each one is a mystery."

"No, it's just—why didn't I know?"

"Did you know your wife was pregnant when she conceived?"

"What does that have to do with it?" Byron said.

"Well," Terry said, "you were there when it happened, in fact you did the deed, and yet you didn't know about it."

"Terry, I think that's something else."

Terry shrugged. "Are you in love with your colleague?"

"Of course not. He was becoming angry. "What are you getting at?"

"I am trying to elicit a coherent statement from you," Terry said. "So far all you have managed to tell me is that you are obsessed with your colleague and are not in love with her. I am having trouble following your flight of ideas."

"Look." Byron stared down at his feet. "Someone whom I have known for more than twenty years has overnight turned into a woman. It's shaken my understanding of reality. I can no longer trust what I see before my eyes."
"Yet you call yourself a scientist," Terry said thoughtfully. "It is simply a matter of surgery and hormonal therapy, isn’t it? Changing one form into another by a well-documented protocol?"

Byron stared at him. "That’s not what I mean," he said.

Terry clasped his hands together happily. "Yet a magical process is involved as well! An invisible and powerful force! Something that is beyond our understanding! But" —he put his hands on his desk and stared into Byron’s eyes—"even your poetic license will not allow you to accept it?"

"My poetic license?" Byron said.

"Are man and woman so different, so unrelated, that no transformation is possible? It’s this Western culture," Terry said in disgust. "In my country, people exchange sexes every day."

Byron wondered if he had understood Terry correctly.

"Suppose your little baby comes to you in twenty years and says, ‘Daddy, I am now Chinese.’ Will you disown the child, after twenty years of paternity? No! He will still be the son you love."

"Chinese?" Byron said.

"I fear our time is up," Terry said. He stood up and held his hand out. Byron stood up, and shook it.

"Good to see you again. Would you like to resume these discussions on a regular basis? I can see you at this time every week."

"I don’t think so," Byron said. "I just wanted this one consultation."

"Glad to be of service," Terry said. "No charge, no charge. Professional courtesy. Someday I may need an experiment!" He chuckled. "Or a poem."

"You act as if you’ve lost your best friend," Emily said. "I am losing him. I’ve known him for twenty years and suddenly I find out he’s the opposite of what I thought he was."

"Ah," Emily said, and she sat back against the sofa. "Here we go. Men and women are the exact opposite."

"Don’t you start," he said. "I don’t need an attack on the home front."

"I’m supposed to comfort you, I suppose," Emily said. "Sympathize with you because your good buddy’s going over to the enemy."

"Well?" Byron said. "Aren’t you secretly glad? Having a celebration? Letting him in on all your girlish secrets?"

Emily shook her head. "We’re talking about a human being who has suffered for forty years, and you’re jealous because we’re giving him some lacy underpants? You’re welcome to some of mine, if that’s what you want." She smiled at him.

"Suffered?" Byron said. "The dire fate of living in a male body? A fate worse than death, clearly."

"Why are you attacking me?" Emily said.

"I’m not attacking you," he said. "I’m just upset." He scooted closer to her and put his arms around her, laying his head against her breasts. "What if I lost you, too?"

"Sweetheart," Emily said, "you’re stuck with me for the duration."

"I hope so," Byron said. He turned his head and pressed his face against her. "I certainly hope so." His voice, caught in her cleavage, sounded very far away.

"EARLY TWENTY YEARS AGO," BYRON SAID softly, holding Toby in his arms as he rocked in the dark, "when Daddy and Uncle Zach were very young—"

Toby, who was gazing at his eyes as he spoke, flung out a fist.

"He was still Uncle Zach at the time," Byron said. He tucked the fist into his armpit. "Anyway, we used to ride out to the quarries outside Bloomington to go swimming. You’ve never been swimming, but it’s a lot like bobbing around in Mummy’s uterus."

Toby’s eyes closed.

"We used to ride our bikes out there after we’d fin-
ished our lab work,” Byron said. “Riding a bike in the summertime in southern Indiana is a lot like swimming too. The air is so full of humidity you can hardly push the sweat out your pores.

“So we would ride out there in the late afternoon, and hide our bikes in the trees, and go out to our favorite jumping-off place,” Byron said. “And Daddy and Uncle Zach would take off all their clothes, and get a running start, and jump right off the edge of the cliff into space!”

Toby made a sound.

“Yes, the final frontier,” Byron said. “And we would hit the water at the same instant, and sink nearly to the bottom of the bottomless pit, and bob up without any breath. It was so cold.”

He frowned. What kind of story was this to tell his son? Toby was asleep now, but in a few years he’d complain. He’d want plot, and character development.

“That was poetry, son,” Byron whispered. He stood up and laid the sleeping baby on his stomach in the crib. Tomorrow morning Emily would put Toby in his new Baby Bouncer, and Toby Glass would begin to move through the world on his own.

“WHAT ARE YOU GIVING HER?” SARAH SAID.

“Who?” Byron said, looking up from his calculations.

“Zoe,” Sarah said. “We’re giving her silk underwear from Frederick’s of Hollywood. Do you know her bra size?”

“Sarah,” Byron said, pushing his chair back and crossing his arms, “why on earth would I know Zach’s bra size?”

“Oooh,” Sarah said. “Touchy, aren’t we? You are friends.” She stood there watching him as if, Byron thought, she was daring him to deny it.

“There are some things you just don’t discuss in the locker room,” he said.

“Oh,” Sarah said. “Well, what are you getting her?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” Byron said.

DON’T YOU THINK YOU’D THINK ABOUT IT?

It was his mother’s voice, and for a moment Byron thought his mother had spoken there in his office. It was just what she would have said. She would look at him over her glasses, a long, questioning look. “Why not something personal? Intimate? You two have known each other a long time.”

“Mom, you don’t get something intimate for another guy,” he would say.

“Oh, Byron, Byron. You should be more flexible, dear. You sound like your father.” Every time she had said it she meant it as a reproach, but Byron was always rather pleased.

He wished sadly that he could talk to his mother. She never even knew that he had a son of his own. He looked at the picture of Toby on the desk and thought, she would be disappointed to see how much he looks like Emily’s father.

He pictured her sitting in the chair beside his desk, her legs crossed. She had had very nice legs. She always insisted on buying expensive stockings at Dellekamps’.

“When I worked at Du Pont,” she told him more than once, holding out her foot and gazing at her delicately pointed toes, “they gave us all the stockings we wanted, but they were nylon.”

“Mom,” Byron said aloud, “I don’t want to give him anything.”

And as if he had disappointed her again, she saw her sadly pick up her purse from the floor and stand up.

“Just let me tell you this, Byron,” she said. “If you don’t support Zoe at this time in her life, you’ll regret it forever.”

She stepped toward him, shaking her finger at him.

“Forever, Byron.”

He sighed, and looked at the legal pad lying in wait on the desk. His mother had once told him she used to write poetry, but he had never read any of it.

WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL MY MOTHER’S POEMS?” BYRON SAID.

Emily looked up from the paper she was reading and stared at him thoughtfully, chewing on the end of her red pencil. “It wasn’t very good poetry,” she said.

“How do you know?” he said.

She frowned. “Byron, sometimes I think you live in a cocoon.”

“You read it?” Byron said in amazed.

“Sure,” she said. “You know, little poems about love, flowers, the moon.” She shook her head, looking at the paper in her lap. “This guy should try poetry,” she said.

“Why didn’t she let me read it?” Byron said. He glanced at the television screen, where a woman was talking about teenage reproductive strategies in abusive households. “Em, What happened to it?”

“She threw it away,” Emily said. “She thought it was too embarrassing to keep.”

“Why did she talk to you about it?” Byron said.

“We had to talk about something,” Emily said.

“MAYBE YOUR MOTHER IS RIGHT,” BYRON SAID.

“Maybe I have no idea what’s going on in the world.” He peered into the rearview mirror at Toby, who was snoring softly in his car seat and paying no attention.

Byron had thought in the beginning that being a scientist would increase his understanding of the world, and
the world's understanding of itself. But instead, as his work grew more specialized over the years and his expertise became narrower, his brain seemed to be purging its data banks of extraneous information and shutting down, one after another, his receptors for external stimuli. He had been so caught up in chronicling the minuscule changes taking place in the gels and tubes of his laboratory that the universe had changed its very nature without his even noticing. The world had a new arrangement that everyone else seemed to understand very well; even his poetry had simply served to keep him self-absorbed, oblivious of what must be reality.

Actually, he rather liked the idea of living in a cocoon while the world became a wilder and more exotic place. Sirens wailed, cars throbbing with bass notes roared past him with mere children at the wheel, dead women appeared in mirrors, and men changed into women; but Byron and Toby Glass putted across town safe and snug inside a cocoon.

“What do I know?” Byron thought. “What do I know?”

“Can I help you?” said a heavily scented woman with beige hair. Her lips were a carnivorous shade of red, and her eyelids were a remarkable magenta.

“I’m looking for a gift,” Byron said.

“For Baby’s mother?” the woman said.

“Who?” Byron said.

“Baby’s mother,” she said, and with a long scarlet fingernail she poked at the Snugli where Toby Glass was sleeping peacefully against Byron’s stomach.

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**THE SEA MOUSE**

What lay this morning
on the wet sand
was so ugly
I sighed with a kind of horror as I lifted it

into my hand
and looked under the soaked mat of what was almost fur,
but wasn’t, and found
the face that has no eyes, and recognized

the sea mouse—
toothless, legless, earless too,
it had been flung out of the stormy sea
and dropped

into the world’s outer weather, and clearly it was
done for. I studied
what was not even a fist
of gray corduroy;

I looked in vain
for elbows and wrists;
I counted
the thirty segments, with which

it had rippled its mouselike dance
over the sea’s black floor—not on
feet, which it did not have, but on
tiny buds tipped with bristles,

like paint brushes—
to find and swallow
the least pulse, and so stay alive, and feel—
however a worm feels it—satisfaction.

Before me
the sea still heaved, and the heavens were dark,
the storm unfinished,
and whatever was still alive

stirred in the awful cup of its power,
though it breathe like fire, though it love
the lung of its own life.

Little mat, little blot, little crawler,

it lay in my hand
all delicate and revolting.
With the tip of my finger
I stroked it,

tenderly, little darling, little dancer,
little pilgrim,
gray pouch slowly
filling with death.

—Mary Oliver
“Oh,” Byron said. “No. This is for a shower.”
“Ah, I love showers!” the woman said. “What kind?”
“Sort of a coming-out shower.”
“We don’t see many of those,” she said. She turned to survey her wares. “Are you close to the young lady?”
“I used to be,” Byron said. “But she’s changed.”
“Plus ça change,” the woman said. “Something to remember you by. Something in leather?”
“Well, I don’t know,” Byron said, nervously stroking the warm curve of Toby’s back. “I thought maybe stockings?”
The woman frowned. “You mean like pantyhose?”
“I guess not,” he said.
“I know.” The woman tapped Byron’s lower lip with the red fingernail. “Follow me.” She led him to the back of the store and leaned down to pull open a drawer. “For our discerning customers. A Merry Widow.” She held up a lacy black item covered with ribbons and zippers.
“Wow,” Byron said. “I didn’t know they still made those.”
“They are hot,” the saleswoman said. She held it up against her body. “Imagine your friend in this!”
“I can’t,” Byron said.
“Do you know her bra size?” the woman asked.
“I’m not sure it’s final yet,” Byron said.
“Oh,” the woman said. “Well. Maybe some perfume.” Byron followed her back to the front of the store, where she waved her hand grandly at a locked glass cabinet.
“These are very fine perfumes, from the perfume capitals of the world. Paris, Hong Kong, Aspen. This one is very popular—La Différence.”
“That’s good,” Byron said. “I’ll take some of that.”
“Oh, excellent choice!” The woman patted his cheek before she reached into her cleavage and drew out a golden key to unlock the perfume cabinet.
“While Ginny rings that up, would you like to try on some of our makeup?” said another salesperson.
“No, thanks,” Byron said.
Byron sat, and she removed his glasses. “You’ll look terrific,” she said. She leaned toward him, her lips parted, and gently massaged his eyelid with a colorful finger.
“Scuse me while I kiss the sky,” she sang softly, stroking the other one. Then she drew on his eyelid with a long black instrument. “This is Creem-So-Soft,” she told him. “It is so easy to put on.” She drew it across the other eyelid and finally she brushed his eyelashes with a little brush and stood back. “There,” she said. “You are a killer.”
Toby began to gasp into Byron’s shirt. The makeup woman swooped down. “Oooh,” she said. “Little booper’s making hungry noises.” She lifted her eyes to Byron.
“Bett can I stall him.”
“You can?” Byron said.
“Babies love this,” she said. She maneuvered Toby out of the Snugly and sat him down facing her on Byron’s lap. She began to sketch on his face with the Creem-So-Soft while Toby stared silently at her nose. “There!” She picked Toby up and held him for Byron to examine.
Toby beamed and waved his limbs. He was adorned with a black moustache and a pointy black goatee.
“Oh, how darling,” Ginny said, coming back from the cash register. “Will this be cash or charge?”
Byron looked at the bill she handed him. “Charge,” he said. “I thought this store went out of business a long time ago.”
“Lots of people say that,” Ginny said.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THE BABY?” Emily said when Byron walked in the door. “Babies like this,” Byron said. “It’s a preview of what he’ll look like in twenty years.”
“He’s going to be a beatnik,” Emily said. She took Toby from Byron’s arms. “Don’t you think you’re rushing things a little?”
Byron sighed. “They grow up so fast,” he said. He kissed the top of Toby’s head, and then kissed Emily. “How do you like the new me?”
Emily looked at him. “Did you get your hair cut?” she said.
“Em, I’m wearing makeup,” Byron said.
“Oh,” she said. “So you are.” She held Toby up and sniffed at his bottom. “Daddy didn’t change your dipes,” she said, and she carried him off to his room.
Byron went into the bathroom to look at himself. His eyelids were a very bright purple. He picked up Emily’s Barn Red lipstick and carefully covered his lips with it. Then he took off his glasses.
“You know who you look like?” Emily said, appearing beside him in the mirror. “Your mother. Honest to God. If you had one of those curly little perms, you could pass for your own mother.” She peered into the mirror, stretching her upper lip with her forefinger. “Do you think I should shave my moustache?”
“No,” Byron said. “It’s sexy.” He slid his hands under her arms and over her breasts. “Let’s go to bed.”
“No, thanks,” Emily said. She picked up her Creem-So-Soft and started to outline her eyes. “I have no desire to sleep with your mother.”
“You never did like my mother,” Byron said.
“Not a lot,” Emily said.
“I think I’ll go over to the lab,” Byron said. He kissed her cheek, leaving a large red lip print.
“Hold still,” Emily said. She wet a washcloth, and as she scrubbed his lips he had a sudden vision of his mother scrubbing at grape juice the same way thirty-five years ago. “There. Now you look like my husband again.”
He looked in the mirror. His stinging lips were still
pink than normal. "Is wearing makeup always so painful?"

"Always," she said. "We do it for love."

BYRON LIKED WEEKENDS AT THE LAB. HE LIKED weekdays, too, when students and technicians wandered in and out of one another’s labs borrowing chemicals, and all the world seemed engaged in analyzing the structures and chemical interactions of various tissues. But weekends, when the offices were empty and the halls were quiet, and only the odd student padded back and forth from the bathroom, had a cozy, private feeling. Byron could think better in the silence, and he felt close to other scientists, who had given up time in the outside world to bend lovingly over their benches and peer into microscopes, hoping to add to the world’s slim store of truth. Both the lab work he did and the poetry he wrote on weekends seemed to spring from a deeper level: a place of intuition and hope that was inaccessible when he was distracted by bustle. On weekends he caught glimpses of the world he hoped to find, where poetry and science were one, and could explain the meaning of life.

"The meaning of life," he said aloud, and wrote it down on his legal pad. Then he turned and typed it on the keyboard, and it appeared in amber letters on the screen in front of him. He smiled and pushed back in his chair, and put his feet on the desk. Poem or experiment? Either one!

He felt that he was on the threshold of an important discovery.

"W"

Byron opened his eyes. It was Zoe, leaning against the doorjamb. It was definitely and absolutely Zoe; she could no longer be mistaken for a man. He stared at her; what was it? The hair, the clothes, the jaw, the way the arms were folded: all were utterly familiar. What had happened?

"The makeup," Zoe said. She shook her head. "You’re trying to be something you’re not."

He had forgotten about the purple eye shadow and the mascara, but he said, "How do you know what I’m not?"

"It’s just that you’re so conservative," Zoe said.

"No," he said. "I’m really quite wild. I’m just handicapped by my many fears."

"You?" Zoe said.

He nodded. "But you’re wild through and through."

Zoe shook her head. "I’m conservative at the core. That’s always been my major problem." She gazed out the window at the white hills. "You know the only thing I regret? I’ll never have any children now."

"You could adopt."

She shook her head. "They won’t have my genes."

"You never really know your children anyway," Byron said.

Zoe sighed. "Tell me honestly. Did Emily teach you how to put that eyeliner on?"

Byron smiled. "No," he said. "In fact she learned from me."

Zoe narrowed her eyes and stared at him for a moment, and then sat down on a stool. "I’m thinking of going to law school."

"Are you serious?" he said. "You’d leave the lab?"

"Sure. Patents is the way to go."

"You’d leave me?"

Zoe reached over and seized the tablet. "Poetry, poetry, poetry," she said. "Always with you it’s the poetry. Anyone would think you’re too distracted to work."

"You think any of this is easy?" Byron said.

"None of it," she said, and they sat together for a while without talking. "Are you coming to my shower?"

"Aren’t showers supposed to be a surprise?" Byron said.

Zoe shrugged. "I hate surprises. I told Sarah she could give me a shower only if she invited men, too."

"I got you a gift," Byron was surprised to feel suddenly shy. "But is there anything you’d really like?"

"Will you come see me in the hospital?"

Byron nodded.


"It’s the same old me, though," Byron said. "I’m not any stronger than before."

"I really am thinking of law school," Zoe said. "I need to change my life."

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“Changing your sex isn’t enough?”
“No. That’s who I’ve been all along.”
“Oh,” Byron said, and at once he felt very sad, and exhausted. He put his feet up on the desk, and they sat there in silence, gazing at the part of the world they could see through the window.

After a while he told Zoe about Toby’s trip to Dellekamps. “And then,” he said, “I’m sitting on a bench in the mall giving him his bottle, and I look up and these two old ladies are staring at him. ‘That is disgusting,’ one of them says. And then the other one gasps and grabs her arm and points at me. And they both back away looking horrified.”

Zoe began to laugh.

“And then a man and a little girl walk by, and the little girl says, ‘Daddy, is that a homeless person?’ And the father says, ‘No, dear, that’s a man with problems.’”

“Oh,” Zoe gasped, holding her ribs.

Byron wiped the tears from his own cheeks, and when he looked at his hand, he saw that it was smeared with mascara. “I had no idea,” he said, “no idea why these people were saying these things. I’d forgotten about my makeup. And Toby just looked normal to me.”

“Stop,” Zoe said, bending over and clutching her stomach.

“And finally a man comes up to me with his hands on his hips and says, ‘You ought to be ashamed.’”

“I’m dying,” Zoe croaked. “I can’t breathe. Oh.” She jumped from the stool and ran through the door. “I have to pee.”

“You,” Byron called after her, “should be ashamed.”

He listened to the squeeging of her sneakers as she ran down the empty hall, and to the familiar creak of the hinges as she pushed open the door to the men’s room.

“Glad you could make it, glad you could make it,” Terry Wu said, shaking Byron’s hand vigorously.

“Did you doubt that I would?” Byron said.

“You’re a busy man,” Terry said. “So often the cells can’t wait.” He leaned forward and whispered, “I am giving her a vibrator.” Aloud, he said, “The muscles of the calves ache when one first wears high heels.”

“That is so true,” Emily said. She smiled at Terry Wu and pulled Byron away. “That guy gives me the creeps,” she said.

“Honey, you’re being xenophobic,” Byron said. “Things are different in his country.”

They pushed their way through the crowd, Byron cupping one hand protectively around Toby’s head to keep him from being squashed in his Snugli.

“There you are!” Sarah appeared in front of them. “Isn’t the turnout great?” She waved her arm at the crowd.

Emily hugged her. “Did you get it?” she said.

Sarah nodded. “I never spent that much on a bra in my life.”

“How did you know what size to get?” Byron asked.

“I asked her,” Sarah said. She led them over to where Zoe stood beside a gift-covered table. “Here are the Glasses!”

“I’m so glad you could come,” Zoe said. She kissed Emily on the cheek and prodded Toby’s bottom with a glistening red-tipped forefinger. “How’s my little heat-nik godbaby?”


“Next I’m going to have electrolysis on my facial hair,” Zoe said.

“You look pretty good as you are,” Byron said. He wondered when the time would come that Zoe would kiss his cheek. “I bought you some perfume, but I ended up giving it to Emily.”

“Thank goodness,” Zoe said. “I’m allergic to everything but La Différence, anyway.”

“One of these days,” Byron said, “I’ll write you a poem.”

“He’s never done that for me.” Emily waved her hand at the table in front of them. “Look at all this loot.”

They stared at the pile of presents. “I can’t wait to open them,” Zoe said. “I’ve always wanted a shower.”

“Isn’t it wonderful to get what you always wanted?” Byron put his arm through hers and squeezed it, and he could feel her breast against his triceps as she squeezed back, her muscles hardening briefly against his own.

He felt a rush of pleasure. On his left Emily reached for a bacon-wrapped chicken liver; on his right his oldest friend in the world gently disengaged her arm from his to touch the hands of the dozens of people who had come to wish her well; and from his shoulders, like a newly discovered organ of delight, hung the little bag full of Toby Glass.

Toby Glass, who could grow up to be anything!

The musicians in the string quartet hired for the occasion began to tune their instruments, leaning toward each other, listening, nodding gravely. The cellist moved her stool a little closer to the violinist; the violinist held her instrument away from her neck as she shook back her long red hair, and then replaced it firmly under her chin. Suddenly, as if spontaneously, each player lifted her bow and held it poised in the air for a long moment, until at some prearranged and invisible signal they plunged their bows toward the strings of their various instruments and began to play. □