

Smoke and Teeth

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When I think about my older sister, Marina, the first memory that comes to mind is of the time she beat the shit out of my bullies. I was seven years old, and I was always the kind of kid who liked to play dolls with the girls instead of sports with the boys. Just one of those things that comes with your big sister being your first, best friend, I guess. I learned the hard way that I was supposed to be ashamed of things like that; the other boys had me on the ground, sobbing, when she appeared above me, looking like a saint through the stained glass veil of my tears. In her own way, she'd always been something of a sensitive kid. Tomboyish—more of a boy than I was, the bullies liked to say—and usually too sensible by far to involve herself in playground brawls, but she had been bullied plenty herself for her weight; thanks to that, she wasn't about to stand by and watch while her little brother got the same treatment. Watching her throw hands on my behalf filled me with two conflicting emotions. On the one hand, an immense, swelling sense of love, admiration and gratitude, and, on the other, a deep, gnawing sense of shame that I, as a boy—as a man—hadn't been able to stand up for myself. That day, I wanted nothing more than to be just like my big sister.

No wonder I spent years wondering about my gender. Our parents are pretty laid-back and were always perfectly happy to let me experiment. But as I grew up, I grew comfortably into my own masculinity. I have no issues with my body, despite being a scrawny nerd. All I want to do is live up to the example my big sister always set for me, as a person and as a feminist.

The second memory that comes to mind when I think of her is of how, last summer, when she came home from college, everything I loved and respected about her had been scooped out and replaced with nothing but

cotton candy.

What now sits across from me, at a table in the smoking area of some awful campus bar, can scarcely be called my sister. Gone is the tomboy. Gone is the smart, sensible big sister. Gone is the modest, inhibited young woman. It's like something else is wearing Marina's skin, something bubblegum pink and bottle blonde. I wish it was. I'd sooner believe in horror story doppelgangers than accept that my sister has become some kind of grotesque, anti-feminist parody. All around us at this bar are male and female students, always in pairs, all of them flirting, peacocking, giggling, drooling, leering. The girls are all dressed so skimpily, all showing so much skin, all performing the trite femininity of a bygone age to attract partners, and I cannot stand the way that my sister now fits in perfectly.

She even insisted this be where we meet. I have no idea why. It's not like she smokes.

"Hey Adam! Sooooo," Marina drawls, her every word punctuated with an airheaded giggle and a nauseating amount of vocal fry. "What are you, like, so desperate to talk to me about, anyway?"

The way she talks is appalling. The way she looks is even worse.

A pink string bikini top stares me in the face. Along with it, matching pink, heeled sandals, and a pair of Daisy Dukes that almost disappears between Marina's plush hips and the chubby expanse of her exposed belly. That's it. That's all she's wearing—and goodness, doesn't she know it? She seems so *pleased* with herself, and it makes my chest tighten with pangs of disappointment and shame. I'm no prude, but this isn't my sister. She isn't like this. Isn't some party girl. All around us, heads are still turned in her direction, eyes still caught by the spectacle of the plump slut my sister has become swinging her hips as she waltzed into the bar and sat down opposite me.

I don't want them to see her like this. Nobody should see her like this.

"Jesus, Marina," I mutter, my revulsion getting the better of my tact. "What the hell are you wearing?"

"Marina?" Marina scrunches up her face in a cutesy pout. Like she's a brainless pop star on American Idol, playing to the cameras. "Oh, oopsie! I guess I never actually, like, told you—it's just Mari now! Way cuter."

"Mari?" I roll the diminutive around my mouth. It's abhorrent. That's not my sister. My sister was always proud of her name. Always hated people trying to shorten it.

"Uh-huh!" She beams at me, oblivious. "Anyway, cute outfit, right?"

As she poses and preens for my approval, a conflicted tooth snags me. What if I should be happy instead, seeing her so happy and so confident? It's always been such a struggle for her. I'm her brother. I'm a man. Is it really my place to judge her? To tell her how she's supposed to dress and present? Is the way she's embracing her body really so wrong? Then Marina lets out another ditzy giggle that makes her chest heave, threatening to spill out of her sorry excuse for a top, and it reminds me: yes. Yes, it is. I can't count the number of times I heard Marina lamenting being so well-endowed in that department. A proud feminist, she always hated the way it made people treat her. Like she was stupid. Like she was there for them to enjoy. It's one thing to come to terms with your body. It's another thing to have your morals and sensibilities completely inverted. Christ, she's visibly *enjoying* being ogled by the other students at the bar. This isn't what a woman is supposed to be. Not in this day and age, and we both know it. She's the one who taught me that. What's happened to her isn't natural.

Somebody has done something to my sister.

"Yeah, um..." I begin awkwardly. I need to take it slow. Feel her out. "Your outfit is actually part of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh, yeah?" Marina flashes me a perplexing wink. "Wanna talk about girl clothes, sibby?"

I blink. Sibby? She's never called me that before. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," Marina impishly waves away my question. "Toooooootally nothing to worry about."

"Right." Weirder and weirder. But I press on. "Your outfit. Don't you think it's a little... much? It's such a huge change for you. And it's, well... isn't it kind of opposed to everything you always talked about?"

"Jeez, sibby," Marina snorts. "You sound just like Mom and Dad."

I suppose I do. They're hardly more pleased with Marina's transformation than I am. The only difference is, they seem to view it as a disastrous but inevitable college girl phase. They sent her back at the start of the semester armed with nothing more than a lecture about safe sex and rectifying her plummeting grades. They don't see what I see: that Marina wouldn't do this on her own. I dread to think who's responsible. Some older grad student, perhaps, or a sleazy, graying male professor. The very notion makes me start trembling with rage.

Now that I've followed in her footsteps to college, I have to save her. I'm her brother. I'm a man now. It's my duty.

"Look, I..." I grasp. "Obviously you can dress however you want. I'm just

questioning whether this really *is* what you want.”

“Huh?” Marina’s doe-like eyes brim with naive curiosity as she peers at me. “I don’t get it.”

God, she really doesn’t, does she? It’s like the light inside her head has gone dim. The gormless ‘O’ formed by her parted, pouted, pink-glossed lips is a portal into utter vacuity. Where is the intelligent, dignified older sister I always looked up to? “I mean...” I sigh. I’m getting nowhere hinting at things. “Marina, is so-“

“Mari!” she interrupts, chipper.

“Mari,” I concede, exasperated. “Is someone making you do this? Forcing you to dress and act this way?”

I’m braced for all sorts of different reactions. Outrage. Evasion. Fear. I am not at all ready for Marina to simply sit back, fold her arms, and flash me a sly smirk.

“Kind of, like, real interesting for you to assume that someone had to *force* me to be more *feminine*, sibby,” she titters. “Feel like maaaaaybe that reveals a little more about you than me, huh?”

“Huh?” This is ridiculous. My sister looks perfectly smug the way only a truly dumb girl can, even though what she’s saying is incomprehensible. “No, that’s-”

At that moment, as I open my mouth to speak, I suck a breath and inhale smoke. A woman smoking at the next table has exhaled fumes in my direction. Caught off-guard, I can’t help but break into a fit of hacking coughs as I feel the smoke infect my lungs and seep into my veins. My train of thought is ruined, and my head feels desperately light for lack of oxygen.

“That’s what, sibby?” Marina asks, seemingly untroubled. Guess she’s gotten used to air as foul as this.

I’ve lost the sentence on my lips but, light-headed as I am, I can’t forget what I came here for. “Look, sis, I’m worried about you!” I beg. “Can’t you see? This isn’t you. None of it. The clothes. The hair. The way you talk. If it was just a makeover, that’d be one thing. But, God, your grades. You’re going to flunk school at this rate, and that’s one thing you never would have let happen! What about the rest of your life?”

Like before, Marina appears utterly oblivious to my desperation. She reacts with little more than an amused, indulgent eye-roll. “Sure. *You’re* the one who needs to be worried about *me*. Totally.”

“What...” I groan, and give up. It’s not worth trying to make sense of

where this is coming from. I'm having a hard time thinking clearly after that dose of secondhand smoke, and the fact that Marina can't see why I'm reacting this way is merely proof that there's something truly wrong with her. "Yes! I am! Look, just... is there anyone pressuring you? At all? Has anyone given you, I don't know, any strange drugs? Maybe there's someone pushing you to do this. Encouraging you. Right? There has to be something."

I need to hear that this isn't my sister. Marina sighs like she's merely humoring me, and makes a big show of panting a finger on her cheek and stretching her lips to one side as she thinks. "Oh!" she exclaims. "Well, there's Professor Lambert, obviously."

The name triggers a flood of adrenaline. A professor. Of course. "Professor Lambert?"

Marina nods enthusiastically. "Uh-huh! Professor Lambert helps me out with school. Been helping me, like, figure myself out, too."

At once, it all falls into place. An older professor. Probably some divorced, sleazy piece of shit who gets off on having his female students wrapped around his little finger. Now I just need to figure out how he's done this to Marina. "With school?" I snort. "Doesn't seem like that's been working out."

"No, no, it's been great!" Marina squeals. The eager stars in her eyes as she speaks about him put butterflies in my stomach. "See, Professor Lambert helped me get it: girls don't need brains!"

That hits me like a thunderbolt. My blood runs cold. "What?"

"Girls don't need brains!" she repeats, chipper. "School is, like, soooo easy now! I don't even have to try. Just gotta worry about looking pretty." She giggles, infatuated. "Professor Lambert says girls just need to look pretty."

It's so much worse than I thought.

I bury my face in my hands to hide the tears of anguish beading up in my eyes. This is beyond perverse. I've heard plenty of nonsense about liberal colleges brainwashing their students, but never it happening the opposite way: a proud, sensible, intelligent young woman turned into some sickening porno caricature, like an awful, patriarchal wet dream. My grief gives way to anger. I ball my hands into fists. I have to do something right this second.

"Hey," I hiss through gritted teeth. "How about you take me to Professor Lambert's office right-"

Another plume of smoke is blown directly into my face.

The way it makes me bend double and cough is maddening and humiliating. I'm completely unable to handle it. It's like the wisps of black

smoke hanging around me are strings, and I'm their puppet. I'm trying to man up, but I can't fight my own lungs. Deprived of air, my head once again becomes perilously absent and light. Through my coughing, I turn and spit a curse at our neighbor. Some older woman, cigarette in hand, who barely seems to notice. I'd love to give her a piece of my mind, but I have more pressing concerns. Besides, a man shouldn't yell at a woman, especially in public.

"OK, Adam- or, uh, sibby." Strangely, my sister seems unaffected by the smoke. She takes full, deep, grateful breaths, like that black cloud is the freshest air she's tasted all day. "Don't you think it's, like, time to tell me what this is all really about?"

"H-Huh?" I bleat. What *is* this all really about? For a perilous moment, I forget. My mind is entirely blank. It's like the hot air I just inhaled is filling my head, displacing my thoughts.

"I think." Marina sits forward and folds her arms over her chest. "This is really about you."

"It's about... me?" I mean to sound incredulous. Instead, I sound awestruck. Is she right? Is this about me?

"Sure it is," my sister presses—then leans forward, conspiratorial. "C'mon, sibby. It's OK. You can totally tell me. Pinkie swear."

"Tell you?" I echo, still caught in this strange, smoky mental lacuna.

"Your big secret," Marina whispers teasingly. "Don't worry. I already know."

I don't know what she's talking about—but strangely, I *want* to tell her, and my desperation brings me to the point of pleading. "W... what's my secret?"

Her grin widens. A smirk of pure certainty and victory. "You're trans."

My jaw drops, and I howl with laughter.

In a way, I'm grateful for the insanity. It hits me like a bucket of ice water, and everything snaps back into place. This isn't about me at all—and I'm sure as hell not trans. It's a ludicrous deflection.

"No, I'm not," I manage eventually, once my laughter dies away.

"Oh, sweetie." Marina's face shifts from a smug grin to a smile of overflowing familiar love. "It's OK! I promise! I'm actually totally excited to have a little sister instead of a little brother."

Now that the hilarity of the suggestion has faded, anxiety creeps back

into my mood. She actually believes this, doesn't she? I shake my head in a bid to clear the accumulated smog. I have stepped into a world inverted. This dimly-lit, smoke-filled bar feels like an underworld. Sitting across from me, my sister might as well be possessed by some strange, dim-witted bimbo demon—and she's telling me that I'm a trans girl? None of it makes any sense.

"Marin—Mari, whatever—where the hell is this coming from?" I demand.

"Isn't it obvious?" The next look that dawns on my ruined sister's face is one of fawning pity. "Look, sis, I totally mean it! I accept you! You're valid! I know it's, like, hard to accept. For real. Super duper hard. Professor Lambert was telling me alllll about it."

"Professor Lambert!" I interrupt, grateful for the lifeline. "He's been talking to you about... me? Whatever, it's not important right now. What's important is—"

More smoke, blown directly into my face from off to one side. The clarity I had only just snatched back dissolves into the acrid, ashen fumes as I, once again, break down into coughing, swaying so hard as I do that I almost slip from my chair. By the time I recover a measure of bodily self-control, my temper is at its limit and I round angrily on the smoker. "Hey, would you mind knocking that the fuck—"

"Mari, you don't mind me butting in, right?" The older woman's chair scrapes against the floor as she stands and slouches over to our table. I can only watch with an incredulous scowl on my face as she sits down directly next to my sister. "Your brother's quite the charmer, isn't he?"

Appallingly, Marina only giggles and presses herself against the intruder's side. "Sister, silly! Like you were telling me!"

"Right." The older woman's thin lips crease into a vile shape. "Sister."

Woozy as I am, I can still put two and two together. I stare aghast across the table, rapidly revising the assumptions I'd made earlier. "Professor Lambert?"

"Professor Iris Lambert. And you're Adam Novak. I've heard so much about you. The pleasure's all mine, I'm sure."

This is not the balding, aging, sleazy male academic I had been expecting—although if it were possible for a woman to play the role, this might be her. Iris Lambert looks to be well into her forties, judging from the streaks of grey through her short, black, well-kept hair. She wears a gray blazer and slacks over a tight, ribbed, black turtleneck, and the eyes that peer out from behind her large, round-rimmed glasses shine with an unwholesome mirth that has

no place in an educator. As I watch, she takes another long drag on the cigarette in her hand. Some weird, long, unbranded roll-up, best I can tell. I brace myself, but this time, I'm not the intended victim. Lambert blows the smoke straight into my sister's face.

Marina coughs only a little—then blushes and giggles like a flustered schoolgirl getting Valentine's chocolate.

Even if I wasn't light-headed from smoke inhalation, I'm not sure I'd be able to make sense of this. Marina's Professor Lambert is... what? A lesbian? She certainly looks the part; her smart outfit puts her on the handsome side of androgynous, even if her figure leans the other way. The way she wraps an arm around my sister's rounded waist, wearing her like a fine accessory, seems to confirm my suspicions. But why would a lesbian do *this*? Lesbians actually like women, and Lambert looks like the type I'd expect to find teaching classes on queer theory and the philosophy of gender. The lines she has Marina bleating about brains and looking pretty are beyond mystifying. This, from a female academic? It's enough to make me wonder if I'm misunderstanding—but then I catch that look in her eye once more, and notice her tighten her grasp on my sister's hip. Like she's daring me to stop her.

And I will.

"What have you done to her?" I growl.

"I simply provide a little guidance, here and there. It's the least I can do, as a mentor." Lambert's voice has long since been cut to ribbons by the disgusting habit in her hand. It rolls over my ears, a low, throaty mix of sandpaper and velvet. There's a certain magnetism to it—or at least, there would be, if not for her blatant lack of sincerity.

"Bullshit!" I retort. "What kind of fucking guidance do you call this?"

"Hey!" Marina pouts, clinging to Lambert's arm. God, everything she does is so unbearably cutesy now. "Don't be, like, mean! Professor Lambert is soooo supportive of you being trans, and all."

I choke on my laughter. "And what the fuck is *that* all about?" I demand. The only reason I'm not screaming is that I don't want to cause a scene. So far, nobody seems to have noticed the commotion. "Shouldn't you know better than to treat a woman this way, Professor? You, of all people?"

Professor Lambert's laugh is a low rumble that speaks to years of curdled malice. "Wow. Mari wasn't kidding. You really are a regular little Boy Scout. A freshman all over, that's for sure. Don't worry, kid. I'll be more than happy to teach you a thing or two, too."

Her attitude—her sheer arrogance—has me seeing red. My light-headedness is almost gone. “Fuck you,” I hiss. “You won’t get away with this.”

“Get away with what?” Professor Lambert laughs. The sound is as coarse as her voice. “What have I done? You can’t even tell me that much, can you? From any reasonable person’s perspective, you’re simply accosting a tenured academic because you disapprove of your sister’s lifestyle choices. Maybe you should calm down, Adam. Stop being so hysterical.”

The fact that she’s half-right pisses me off all the more. I’d like to think that any reasonable person could see what’s wrong with the awful scene playing out before me—a middle-aged professor shamelessly groping a student half her age—but it remains true that I have no evidence. For the moment, though, all that matters is prying Marina away from this loathsome creature. “I’ll...” I splutter, grasping for a plan—for a bluff, even—but nothing comes. It’s this fucking bar. Even when I’m not having smoke blown in my face, it hangs around me in distracting wisps that make every breath stale. “I’ll... I’ll...”

“Yeah, that’s about what I expected,” Professor Lambert sneers. “Mari, you know what to do.”

She turns to Marina, as if I’ve that easily dismissed. As if I’m that little of a concern. In the moment, I certainly feel little. I feel powerless—but when Professor Lambert takes a lazy drag on her cigarette before forcing her tongue down Marina’s throat in a grotesque kiss, something in me finally snaps. I can’t just sit by and watch. Professor Lambert might be a woman, but she’s clearly as much of a sleazy creep as any man I’ve ever met. I don’t want to be the type of guy who gets rough with girls, but there are limits. I bolt to my feet, dash around the table, and grab Marina by the arm. Still gratefully sucking down her professor’s secondhand smoke, she doesn’t offer a word of resistance as I haul her to her feet and away from that creep.

“Marina, we’re leaving,” I say, as firmly as I can muster. “I’m taking you home, where we can talk about this properly. And you, professor, you’re going to—”

My sister kisses me.

I’m blindsided. As soon as her lips touch mine, I go limp. I find myself leaning into her embrace as a strange, slimy pride rises within me. The kiss should disgust me. It’s Marina. It’s my own sister. Instead, the moment makes undeniable sense. I’m a hero, saving the girl. What reward but a kiss? It’s a tale as old as time. I know those thoughts are unworthy of us both. Backwards, even. But I can’t keep them at bay. Not with all of Marina pressed against me.

Not with Marina exhaling Professor Lambert's cigarette smoke straight into my mouth.

By the time I realize that my mouth is beginning to taste of ash, it's far too late. The breath I take in an attempt to cry out only fills my lungs with the inky substance, now thirdhand—from Lambert's lips, to Marina's, to mine—but still a far more potent hit than I've had before. Within moments, my head is empty. It's like passing out, only I'm still here. Still upright. Still watching—albeit, at a strange distance from myself. My thoughts evaporate into the smoke as it fills my head.

Marina breaks off, tittering with pride and glee. I am left swaying, uncertain, open to guidance. Professor Lambert is waiting to provide.

"That's better," she smirks, before tapping at her cigarette. "These things are bad for you, you know. Unless you know exactly what's in there because you've put it there yourself—and unless you've built up quite the tolerance to it. Now, why don't you sit back down?"

Why don't I? No reason at all. It's the most natural suggestion in the world, and I'm grateful for it. I sit back down in my seat.

"There we are." Professor Lambert's smile is nothing short of monstrous, but that observation washes over me like water off a duck's back. "I think we got off on the wrong foot, you and I."

Just like that, I think so too. I nod vaguely. "Yeah."

"I'm glad you agree." Professor Lambert laughs. "What you might not understand is that I'm here to help—you and your sister both. You can trust me. I enjoy guiding the youth, I really do."

A thin wisp of a smile rises to my face. Professor Lambert enjoys guiding the youth. Her pack-a-day voice immediately etches itself onto my brain, effortlessly, wiping away all of my accumulated suspicion and hostility. It's simply a nice thought. A trustworthy thought. A professor who enjoys guiding the youth.

"And you need a lot of guidance," Professor Lambert continues. She's right; I nod. "So listen to me, kid. I'll help you figure things out. Just like your sister."

All I can do is nod now. A little bobblehead brother, with this older professor pushing against my frontal cortex. I really do need a lot of guidance. There's nothing inside my cheap, plastic shell but formless smoke.

"She needed a lot of guidance too." Professor Lambert laughs again. Marina, back at her side, is practically purring. "More than you, in a way."

When she first saw me, she had this whole, big idea about me being some kind of mentor. About me being a safe person. Can you imagine?"

Strangely, I can—and now the image blossoms before my mind's eye. Professor Lambert, for all her open sleaze, with a heart of gold and a smoke-stained halo. A safe person.

"What she didn't understand is that I always liked things better back in the old days," Professor Lambert drones, hunching forward as she sucks on her cigarette. "Back when girls were girls. Dumb. Pretty. Easy to take advantage of. Oh sure, I had to deal with plenty of nonsense to get my position. But once I did, it was like an all-you-can-eat banquet. Now, though? Now, girls run their shrill little me-too mouths about things like that. Nowadays, boys like you call themselves male feminists and act like sensitive, cloying white knights. It's exhausting. How did things get so bent out of shape? None of you get it. You think gender roles are like childish costumes you can put on, take off, play around with, whatever. You think gender is a thing you can simply wave away. Like it's all just smoke and mirrors. Wrong."

My head is still full of fumes. I can't think, much less follow a tirade like that. Nonetheless, I hang on Professor Lambert's every word. Mari does too, a wide-eyed, faithful disciple. Much of the meaning is lost on me, but the effect is not. I feel her rhythm as it builds to a crescendo, and I understand that I am about to receive wisdom.

"See, gender has teeth," Professor Lambert leers. Once again, her hand is at my sister's hip, groping and squeezing, making her squeal with idiotic delight. It doesn't make me angry. Not this time. It doesn't reach me. I am rapt. I am listening. "Gender is mean. At your age, I learned the hard way that gender has winners—and losers. I worked my way through years of entitled male bullshit, but here I am, at the top. I'm a winner. I get the prize. But you?" The awful smile sharpens. "It's time to come to terms with being a gender loser."

The sinister promise sends a ripple through my smothered mind. I try to reach through the smoke, letting fear stir me. It's no use. I'm too weak. I'm a gender loser. Professor Lambert's words carry the heavy ring of truth. I'm young, and uncertain, and I can't even do the one thing a good man is supposed to be able to do: save the woman I care about. Compared to me, Professor Lambert is like a figure out of myth. Cigarette in one hand, pretty girl in the other. Matured. Experienced. A consummate winner, carrying off her own, twisted form of dykey masculinity better than any man ever could. Sleaze and greed are her raiments. My corrupted, dumbed-down sister, her trophy. Compared to her, I am nothing. All I can do is wait to be put in my

place.

“But if there’s one thing I like about these modern times, it’s that they have a nice little name for what you’re going to be,” Professor Lambert croons. “And all kinds of ways to make you as pretty as I want. So listen carefully.” I do. I lean in. I take a breath. When Professor Lambert speaks next, the hammer falls. “You’re transgender.”

Once again, it hits me like a bucket of ice water—but this time, I freeze. It courses through my veins, and I feel the surest foundations of my identity become brittle. I cannot laugh it off as I did before. I bend to Professor Lambert’s sickly-sweet guidance—but I do not break. It’s just too *much* for me to get my head around, and that leaves me questioning. Leaves me doubtful.

“N-no,” I mewl. “I’m not.”

“It’s OK, sis,” Marina urges. I can’t tell if she understands what’s happening. I can’t tell if I do, either. “Just accept it! We’re all totally on your side.”

Her words are as sharp a scalpel to my psyche as Professor Lambert’s. *Just accept it*. It echoes through me, all the more potent for coming from the sister I feel such overbearing admiration for.

“I...” I’m drowning. “I...”

“All those years spent looking up to Mari here,” Professor Lambert suggests. She speaks now as a therapist, diagnosing me with condescending faux-kindness. “And you tried to tell yourself it *wasn’t* because you wanted to be a girl, like her? That kind of self-deception is very common among trans people, you know.”

“I...”

“You want to be like your sister, don’t you?”

That goes down easy. Dangerously easy. “Yeah.”

“*Exactly* like your sister,” Professor Lambert insists. “Right?”

I can sense the trap coming. Not well enough to actually avoid it. “Y-yeah.”

“And.” Professor Lambert seizes on the opportunity with evident relish. “Your sister is a girl, isn’t she?”

I’m already nodding—but something about her word choice, and her utterly derisive tone, manages to summon an objection from within me. A habit my sister spent years drilling into me rises to my defense. “N-not a girl...” I protest. “A... woman.”

Professor Lambert laughs so hard she almost chokes. “A woman?” she says condescendingly. “No, sweetheart. No. *I’m* a woman. Your sister is just a girl. Just look at her.”

I do. And with Professor Lambert’s words choking the sense from my mind, the scales fall from my eyes.

Respect, nurtured and treasured for years on end, curdles and dissolves. I look at Marina, and I see Mari. I see a giggling, airheaded ditz who has thrown her dignity to the wind to cling to Professor Lambert’s arm. Her blonde hair, her pink clothes—there’s something so undeniably regressive about it. A skimpy Barbie doll approximation of femininity. The way she bares her plump, curvy body for all to see is the final straw. She’s making a sex object of herself. That’s not what women do. As an ally, I’ve always believed that. I respect women, of course. But not Mari. Not anymore.

My sister is just a girl.

And I want to be just like her.

“She...” I tremble. “She...”

“You want to be a girl.”

Little by little, word by word, a new vision of society is being chiseled into my smoke-filled head. Thanks to Professor Lambert’s astute guidance, I’m coming to understand that my previous perspective was hopelessly binary. Men and women—those two poles defined the axis of my thinking, even if I did acknowledge that there are people who don’t conform to either term. What unfolds now before my mind’s eye is far more elaborate. Far more charged.

Man and woman, yes—although in Professor Lambert’s presence, men strike me as a needless afterthought. But girls also. There’s masculine versus feminine, and winner versus loser. Armed with this second axis, everything becomes so much clearer. The world is an inverted pyramid. Those who cannot handle gender’s teeth—those like Marina and I—slide to the very bottom, collapsed into girlhood to suit the role assigned to us not at birth, but through our own failure to play by the age-old rules of the game.

“I...” The abyss calls to me, and Mari is its vessel. Thanks to her, the bottom rung sings a siren song. I see the position of utmost, girlish abasement and I desire it—all because of her. My ultimate role model. I can no longer look at her with respect, but my admiration holds true, however twisted it’s becoming. She’s a perfect girl. Everything a gender loser should be. “I...” I want to be just like my sister. I want- “Nnnoooo!”

I’ve held out long enough. The smoke is beginning to fade. My head is

beginning to clear. I'm left to pick up the pieces, and survey the damage. Which is a strange way for me to think—Professor Lambert is a safe person. She enjoys guiding the youth. She's doing her best to teach me how the world works—and yet, she's wrong about this. At the base of my gut is an instinctive sense of revulsion at her words. It's hardly fair to the professor, but I can't bring myself to agree with her.

"No?" Professor Lambert seems more amused than perturbed by my challenging her. That's good. I wouldn't want to seem ungrateful.

"N-no." I'm still uncertain, but as my head clears my conviction grows. I can't be a girl. Can't be the kind of gender loser the professor has been filling me in about. I need to step up. Be a man. Save my sister.

Save her. Like she's nothing more than a damsel in distress.

I guess that fits. She's just a girl, after all. I can't even remember what, exactly, I'm supposed to be saving her from, but the logic remains compelling. Mari is a girl. A trophy. If I want to be a winner, I need to lay claim. Take her. Fighting to right myself, I overcorrect, and an old, very different kind of toxin begins to stain my mind. With it, I begin to look at Professor Lambert as a competitor. She's been such a help to us both—but I need to prove myself. It is both boyhood aspiration and jungle law: to be a man, I have to pry what's mine out of a rival's hands. Mari is mine. Not that I want to fuck her—she's my sister—but family is close enough. A man looks out for his blood.

There's no alternative. Not if I want to be anything but a loser.

Professor Lambert seems to take note of the way I sit up a little taller and puff out my chest. She takes a small case out of her pocket and rolls a fresh cigarette.

"Maybe I was wrong about you, kid," she admits. She snaps her fingers; Mari reaches into her purse for a lighter, and lights her up. "Want a smoke? If you can handle it, anyway."

"Sure," I reply. Her grudging respect makes me uneasy. As a man, it stokes my pride—but I'm painfully conscious of the fact that I'm role-playing. None of this really suits me. It isn't how my sister would act. "Course I can."

Still, I can't back down from a challenge like that. Not now that I've set my sights on Professor Lambert's girl. I want to be a winner. She hands the cigarette across the table. I take it. I've never smoked before in my life, but I do my best to follow her example. I bring it to my lips, brace myself, and inhale.

As soon as the acrid smoke hits my lungs, I explode into coughing.

There's definitely more in these than just tobacco. That's one of the last thoughts I have before all the rest are burnt to ash. Another is how utterly humiliating it is to choke and splutter like this. The brand of toxic masculinity that had briefly been fermenting within me won't stand for it. I feel weak. I feel like a pussy. Like a loser—and then, I feel nothing at all. I am nothing. I am smoke, and hot air, and I am ready to be given form.

"Ridiculous," Professor Lambert cackles, as she reaches across the table to retrieve her cigarette from my unresisting fingers. "And typical. Losers like you fall for anything."

It's true. I do. I'm so lost in the smoke I'm not sure what I fell for, but I know Professor Lambert is right. She's always right. She's a winner. She provides guidance. That's as much as I can wrap my head around. The doses I received before are nothing compared to this firsthand flood of mind-altering bliss. I feel it now: the high the nicotine brings, leaving me delirious, awestruck, open to suggestion. I understand it now: I can't handle it. This is not for me. I have lost. I am a trophy to be claimed. A blank slate.

"Let's try this again," Professor Lambert purrs. Her voice is like smoke itself. "You're trans."

I'm trans.

In this dim, sleazy, campus dive bar, I am reborn. The word 'transgender' is stamped on the untempered clay of my psyche, red-hot enough to bake it solid. For the rest of my life, I will remember this moment as my cradle. It will forever be the moment I became myself. My resistance is long gone. I am wide-eyed, credulous, accepting.

I am trans.

But what does that mean? The new core of my identity is, to me, a mystery. I've always supported trans people—and doesn't that make so much sense, now?—but I don't know what it's like to actually be trans. I am a book with blank pages, only the title written. Luckily for me, Professor Lambert is here to provide guidance.

"You want to be a girl," she supplies, eyes bulging behind her glasses, registering a lurid, perverse interest that I parse, somehow, as benevolent.

"I want to be a girl," I echo, awestruck. Of course I do. Is that it? Is that the core of it—that I'm a boy who wants to be a girl? My longstanding admiration for my sister takes on a new hue. She's a girl. She's exactly what I want to be. My dream of manhood dies on the vine.

"Right." Professor Lambert's grin is a jagged half-moon. "And the crazy thing is, these days? That's more than enough. Don't get me wrong, I'm not

complaining. More girls in the world suits a woman like me just fine. But remember what I told you: gender has teeth. Time to meet the fangs, sweetheart.”

I blink, uncomprehending. I’m still lost and smoke-addled. What the professor is telling me sounds scary, but I know I can trust her. She knows so much better than me.

Which is why it hits me so hard when she leans over the table and gleefully tells me: “You want to be a girl, so you hate your body, don’t you?”

“I...” Before I know what’s happening, there are tears in my eyes. “I hate my... body.”

It makes sense.

I want to be a girl, and what kind of girl likes having a boy’s body? Not a trans girl, that’s for sure. Even I know that much, but when it comes from Professor Lambert’s lips, it bites. It bites deep.

“For example, I bet you hate your body hair, right?” she suggests. I nod.

“Y-yeah,” I breathe, aghast. The more Professor Lambert speaks, the more my dysphoria crystallizes. Suddenly, all the hairs on my arms are like thousands of black needles poking into my skin. Desperate to hide them, I retract my hands into my sleeves—but it’s not enough. I can feel them all down my legs, scraping against my jeans. It’s unbearable.

“Hate your lack of curves too, I’m sure,” Professor Lambert adds. “Girls are supposed to have those.”

“Right,” I sob miserably. “Yeah.” My sister is all the confirmation I’ve ever needed of that. She has no shortage of curves—and I don’t. What am I supposed to do? I’m so bony and angular. How am I ever going to be a girl like this?

“Lots of trans girls hate their deep voices, too,” Professor Lambert adds idly. I know she’s trying to help me, to explain, but her every offhanded comment compounds my torment. It’s like she can see right through me, and can speak into the world every truth I’ve ever tried to hide. “And the way you dress—that’s not very girly, is it?”

“S-sorry,” I squeak, struggling to force myself into a higher register. She’s right, of course. Jeans and a hoodie? Girls don’t dress this way. Not when they’re trying, anyway. Girls dress like my sister. Pink tops and Daisy Dukes. But they have curves to show off, and I don’t. What am I supposed to do? It’s so unfair.

“Oh, and that name of yours,” my mentor remarks. “Adam. That’s not a

girl's name, is it? I bet you can't stand it."

"C-can't... stand..." I whimper. "B-but..."

Do I have to hate that, too? That's what I'd plead if I could bear to hear the sound of my own voice. Adam. It's not a girl's name, that's for sure. But it's the only name I've ever known. It means so much to me. It means everything. It's a good name, a strong name—that's what Mari always told me, when I needed to pull myself together as a little kid. It is who I am. I can't let that go, can I?

"Yes, you can't stand it," Professor Lambert drives home. She is implacably thorough in her guidance. She won't let me labor under falsehoods. "What kind of girl could? I bet every time you hear it spoken aloud, you flinch. Adam, Adam, Adam."

I recoil from the verbal blows. She's right, of course. The discordant split between the blunt, masculine name and the girl I hope to become is unbearable. I should give in—she knows best—but for some reason, I can't bring myself to. Maybe I really am a girl. Stubborn, sullen, hysterical.

"S-s-stop," I plead, though I can't tell exactly what I'm begging for.

"You know what trans people call names like that, Adam?" Professor Lambert jeers across the table. I have to remind myself that she's guiding me, even if it hurts. Sometimes tough love is best. "Deadnames. Isn't that a nice thought? You can just let your name die, Adam. It's that easy."

"No, no, no!" I'm in a panic now. My gut tells me I'm in freefall. My lungs scream at me that I'm huffing down poison. "Just... just g-give me a moment."

"Hush, sweetheart," Professor Lambert soothes—and I'm so very grateful for her patience and kindness. "It's OK. Let Iris Lambert fix you up. Go on. Let it slip away and out of mind. Let it die."

"N-no, please!" I beg, but it's too late. I can feel it happening already. I am nothing. A vapor, dancing on her wind. I can't fight it. My memory is already fading. "I'm Adam. I'm Adam. I-I'm Adam. I... I'm Adam. I'm..." I say it over and over like I'm giving mouth-to-mouth, trying to keep it alive with my breath. But it's no good. Each repetition is more painful than the last, a thorn of unwanted masculinity driven deeper and deeper until I can bear it no longer. Until I relent. Against my will, it is a mercy when the name slips into the sunken graveyard of my repressed memory. "I..."

I don't know my own name. Or rather, I don't have a name. I am being reborn; I am between lives. This awful smoking area is my womb, and Professor Iris Lambert my mother. Like all mothers, she has a blessing to

impart.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” she says, grinning at the tears staining my cheeks. “You can do so much better. I’ll even help you with that, too. I’m not the most creative with names, I admit. Marina to Mari—not exactly a masterstroke. But for you, I think there’s an obvious choice.” She draws a breath, and lets me savor the anticipation of my becoming. “Your name is Eve. Enjoy it, babygirl.”

Eve.

The first woman—no, the first girl. Because she didn’t come first, did she? Adam—for some reason, I’ve always hated that name—came first of all, and she was made just for him out of no more than a discarded bone. A trophy. A loser for a winner. A girl, naked, created to go forth and multiply and do little else besides. Suddenly, the tears in my eyes are joyful and sparkling. It’s such a beautiful, special name. A girl’s name. And how many trans girls get to keep the name their maker gave them?

“My name is Eve.” I whisper it like a prayer of thanks.

My older sister, Mari, reaches across the table. She’s been a silent, starry-eyed spectator for some time now, but when she clasps my hand in hers, I see that she shares my joy. “You’re my sister, Eve,” she squeals. “I’m so, so, soooo happy to meet you at last.”

What could make a girl happier?

But there’s so much more to do. I become conscious of the fact that this first step, however significant, is only the first. The dysphoria Professor Lambert helped me recognize is torture. I can’t stand to be here, in public, being looked at. Not when I know everyone around us probably sees me as a man.

Professor Lambert is, as ever, perfectly attentive to my dread. “Hey,” she ventures, smoky voice dripping with faux-kindness. “How about we get out of here, and I’ll teach you how to truly be a girl?”

I nod emphatically. There’s nothing I want more.

Mercifully, Professor Lambert is quick to whisk us out of the bar and toward her campus office. We walk through the night together, my sister and I each with one of Professor Lambert’s arms wrapped possessively around our waists. It’s wonderful. Almost makes me feel like a real girl, but for the fact that I can tell where the older lesbian’s attention truly lies. She makes no secret of the way she ogles and gropes my sister’s plump, gorgeous, exposed body, whereas I am, for now, a mere work in progress.

I end up ogling my sister too. I want to be just like her. And perhaps, with a little guidance, I will be.

Professor Lambert's office is, like her, old-fashioned, and stinks of tobacco every bit as much as the bar. Stepping through the doorway is like stepping through a portal into the nineteen-fifties, all earth tones and mid-century modern decor. Once, that would have struck me as a red flag. Now, my values are hopelessly polluted; I see it as a mark of taste, and the heirloom of a simpler, better age. Professor Lambert deposits my sister and I on the smart, orange, wood-accented couch, then lights up again; a quick glance reveals that the fire alarm has long since been disabled. Once her cigarette is tucked between her lips, she opens a small drinks cabinet at the back of the room and pours herself a glass of scotch. After a sip and an appreciative sigh, she is ready, and we begin.

"First lesson," she instructs, perching on her desk and leaning back easily. "Girls take whatever they're given."

"Right." I nod tremulously. It's a monstrous commandment, but I'll swallow it whole. The short walk has brought me some way back to sobriety, but true sanity is forever out of reach. I'm clearheaded enough to be afraid of what's happening to me, but my dysphoria is greater than my fear. As bad as being a girl might be, being a man is worse. "Yeah. OK."

"So," Professor Lambert grins, "open wide, Eve."

A quiet voice at the back of my head begs me to refuse, but the euphoria I feel at the use of my new name sings far louder. Gratefully, I sit forward and open my mouth. Professor Lambert takes a long drag, enjoys the flavor, and then blows acrid smoke directly into my waiting face. I cough and splutter but, like a girl should, I take what I'm given. Within moments, a familiar, smoldering foggiess settles heavy across my mind. I am once again primed to burn my life to ash, and be rebuilt.

"Look at your big sister," Professor Lambert tells me. "You want to be just like her, right? So take a good, hard look. What do you see?"

I turn to Mari and look. Not just look, study. She is, to me, the very definition of girlhood; I can't let anything slip my notice. What do I see? I'm not sure. Where to begin? Her soft, curvaceous body? Her girly clothes? Her bleached, blonde hair? It could be any of them, but the more I stare, the more it is her eyes that transfix me. There's so little left in them now. A mere void, an empty ocean of vapidty. They transport me back to something Mari told me before, and provide me with my answer.

"I see..." I ponder unsteadily. "She's... she's so dumb."

At that, Professor Lambert howls with laughter so hard she almost spills her drink. "I love a clever student!" she applauds. "That's right, Eve. Your big sis is quite the airhead. Dumb as rocks. See, girls don't need brains."

"Girls don't need brains."

Mari echoes her professor with a look on her face like she feels proud of being able to remember even that much. The awful absurdity of the moment helps to bring me back to myself. We exchange mismatched looks, hers smug, mine freshly horrified at what I am about to lose. I try to tell myself that change is always scary. A chick must be terrified as it leaves the egg. But deep down, I know I'm not ready for this.

"So, Eve," Professor Lambert leers. "Want to be dumb like your sister?"

The imminent possibility she suggests stirs such primal fear in me that my survival instinct, almost vanquished, comes roaring back. "N-no," I shake my head frantically. I've always been proud of my intelligence. For most of my life, it was the only thing I had to be proud of. "N-no. Please. Not that."

"Oh?" Ever the indulgent mentor, Professor Lambert is charmed and amused by my efforts to think for myself. "But don't you want to be a girl?"

I do. More than anything, and that's what makes this so hard. I want to be a girl, and girls don't need brains. I try to reason with myself. To push against the boundaries of my own thinking. Can't I be a smart girl? Is that so wrong? Yes, the warning pang of dysphoria tells me, as it overwrites all the feminist values my sister once worked so hard to plant in my head. Girls don't need brains, and my gender is far too new and fragile for such radical nonconformity.

"Y-yes," I protest. "But... but... but..."

"But, but, but," the professor echoes mockingly. "At least you're starting to sound like a typical girl with a head full of nothing. But you want to do better than just sound like a girl, right? You want to be the real thing."

"Yyyyes," I whine. Her words spear me through. The thought of being a mere impostor is unbearable. I have to live up to my sister's example. Still, there are some things I just can't bring myself to give up. "But..."

"Don't worry, Eve." Professor Lambert sighs theatrically, pivoting on a dime to simpering sympathy. "I know you're new to all this. Maybe if I explain a little more, you'll be able to get your ditzzy little head around it. See, girls don't need brains because girls are just meant to look pretty."

"Look... pretty..." I echo. All of my feeble willpower is currently occupied with trying to convince myself that I don't need to reduce myself to a

giggling, moronic ditz in the name of my transition. This suggestion, infused with the force of a thousand cultural stereotypes that I've been steeping in since birth, seeps into my porous mind with ease.

"Objects," the professor goes on. "Ornaments. Nothing more. Like a nice, decorative vase. Pretty on the outside, empty on the inside."

"That's..." I whine, even as I yield to the force of her twisted ideology, "so degrading."

"Well, sure," Professor Lambert agrees, her lechery barely disguised beneath the veneer of a kind counselor. "But sometimes, you have to separate the personal and political. Starry-eyed kids like you always miss that. You're so proud of your pretty little ideals. I was the same way, you know. Until I realized that dating women doesn't get me wet the way preying on girls does. Point being: yes, it's degrading. But it's what you need, isn't it?" Her grin widens. "It's what gets you off."

It's what gets me off.

Those words hit me just like the smoke from Professor Lambert's drugged cigarettes. The reaction is physical, before it's mental. Before I can even begin to process my new, fetishistic sexuality—inextricably linked to my new, fetishistic gender—I feel it as an ache, a heat, a raw need.

Being pretty gets me off. Being objectified gets me off. Because I'm a girl.

"You get off," Professor Lambert adds, as though that wasn't bad enough, "on showing off your body. On the way everyone looks at you. On the way they see you as a girl: young, dumb, and an easy fucking slut."

The ache doubles. Triples—but with it, so does the horror. Gender has teeth, and I am more aware than ever of the jaws into which I am falling. I see it playing out before my mind's eye: a life lived in the gaze of a thousand predatory eyes, empty of any meaning but that of being consumed. It terrifies me. It gets me off. I need to be a dumb, easy slut, and I can think of nothing worse. I have dreams. I have aspirations. I have life goals that I want to achieve.

But the need...

My gaze falls upon my sister. Saving her—that's one of my aspirations. Or at least, it was. Now, I'm not so sure. As I look at her, the old, familiar insecurities take on a new hue. Not man enough—only, instead, it's not *girl* enough. I always looked up to her, but now, more than ever, she is the embodiment of everything I desire. Foremost among my feelings, emerald-bright, is envy. I see the way she bares her body. I see the way everyone looked at her in that bar, like she was nothing more than an easy piece of

meat. God, I want to be her. My sister is my ultimate transition goal.

And she's a dumb, airheaded, bimbo slut.

I want everyone to look at me that way. It gets me off. I lose myself in the fantasy—until something insistent between my legs seizes my attention.

Professor Lambert notices my hard-on too. “Look at that,” she teases. “You really do want it. And from looking at your sister? Maybe it's true what they say: trannies like you are just depraved perverts.”

My cheeks redden. I shake my head in numb denial, by the tide of my arousal is still rising. After all, Professor Lambert is looking at me like I'm the dumbest girl in the world.

“This is what I call a teaching moment,” Professor Lambert coos. “Go on, kid. Get comfortable. Do what comes naturally. Enjoy yourself.”

The very thought makes my breath catch in my throat, but I cannot disobey her. Clumsily. I unfasten my jeans and tug them down to my hips. My underwear too. I'm already painfully hard, and I begin to throb from my nascent exhibitionism as Professor Lambert stares and laughs. I cannot help but do what comes naturally. I wrap my hand around my shaft and begin to stroke.

“Guess we weren't working with much to begin with,” Professor Lambert quips. I whine, and stroke harder. “But let me ask you, Eve: is that how girls get, when they're turned on?”

I freeze—except for my hand, anyway. A fresh pit of dysphoria opens beneath me. No, of course it isn't.

“No,” Professor Lambert concludes. “See, girls like you don't get hard.”

Oh. Girls like me don't get hard. She called me a girl.

Buoyed by that poisonous euphoria, my smoke-addled brain begins rewiring itself in earnest, severing the nerve endings and blood flows that I'm currently using to gratify myself. I whine an instinctive, incoherent plea as my pleasure recedes and my cock shrinks in my hand—but already, gender's teeth are sinking into my psyche, rewarding me with bubbly glee at the thought that I am, by my impotence, becoming more than a girl. My mental rewriting is far from complete, though, and the process is not painless. Sparks fly as my new and old genders scrape against one another. As a girl, I'm delirious with happiness. As a boy, nothing could be more humiliating. The synthesis I arrive at is to sob and shudder and try desperately to coax my softening cock back to life, even as a dumb, gleeful, unhealthy grin dawns on my face.

Girls like me don't get hard, and now I never will again.

"That's better!" Professor Lambert's mocking laughter is echoed by my sister's airheaded giggle. Both of them drive me crazy. "Now you're starting to look the part."

"I-I am?" I ask hopefully through my tears. The very suggestion is a ray of sunlight. It's all I want.

"Sure," Professor Lambert offers generously. She's such a supportive ally. I'm so grateful. "It's another piece of the puzzle, anyway. Gender's a performance. Your generation loves stuff like that, right? Act the part. Get into the role. Call it method acting. Hell, you can get off on that too."

With that, I become suddenly conscious of a thousand tiny shortcomings in my presentation. The way I sit. The way I hold my body. It's all so grotesquely mannish. I need to do better—but I don't know how. I've never thought about this before. But, as she ever was, Mari is my guide. I want to be just like her, and I look to her now, sitting beside me. I try my hardest to sit the way she sits: legs together daintily, chest pushed out outrageously. Given my lack of curves and assets, the results are lackluster.

"God, look at you! Ridiculous!" Professor Lambert laughs, confirming my worst fears. I shrink into myself, overcome with shame. "Hey, no, it's not that bad," she clarifies, seeing my distress. "Well, it is. But that's good."

My brow furrows. "It's good?"

"Of course!" Professor Lambert explains. "You think girls are meant to be taken seriously? Of course not. You're a spectacle. You're entertainment. Enjoy it. Get off on it."

Professor Lambert is so wise. She has an answer for everything. Her words open my eyes—and hers, dripping with lurid mockery and condescension, take on a very different character. I know how she sees me. I know how I look. Ridiculous. Dumb. Slutty. But with her guidance working its way through my mind, suddenly I enjoy it—not just *being* those things, but being *seen* that way. My gender is a spectacle. I am nothing if I am unperceived. And I can see for myself that, to Professor Lambert, I am very definitely a girl. A gender loser, to be exploited and enjoyed.

The humiliation lights a fire within me. I reach down and spend a few moments pawing at my limp, useless surrogate clit before the lack of pleasure defeats me. "It's g-good," I moan with absent bliss. A thousand new mantras circle me like wisps of smoke. I am unmade, yet again, and reborn. "I-I'm... entertainment."

"That's right." Professor Lambert's eyes glow as bright as the lit tip of the

cigarette dangling from her fingertips. I feel that burning heat raking over my body as she looks. She is entertained, and that is the ultimate affirmation. “Act the part. Look the part. And think the part.”

“T-think the part,” I echo, even though I can sense what’s coming.

“Think the part,” she reiterates. “And girls don’t need brains.”

“Girls don’t... girls don’t... w-wait, nnnoooo!”

Again the abyss calls, and it does so in Mari’s simpering, ditzzy, giggly voice. It pleads with me to give in. To throw my mental faculties into the void, and become paper-thin, superficial, and stupid—exactly what a girl should be. It sounds closer to suicide than transition, but validity is my poison, and it’s a hell of a drug. The notion grows more and more tempting with each passing moment. Arousal swallows my better judgment, and I become infatuated with just how easy it would make it to act the part. Fantasies of the way everyone would look at me if I was as dumb as my sister makes my entire body grow flush with heat.

But I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. I barely remember the reason. My refusal is a mantra. An axiom. That’s all I have left.

“No?” A vein at Professor Lambert’s temple throbs. She’s losing patience. That terrifies me.

“N-no.” Still, I cling to what’s left of myself. I can’t help it. I want to be a girl, I do, but this is a bridge too far.

“No.” The outburst I’m trembling in fear of doesn’t come. Instead, something worse, as the professor sits back and shrugs. “Fine, then. Maybe you aren’t a girl after all.”

My chest tightens like it’s been caught in a vice. I shake my head in numb horror. No. No, not that.

“You had every chance,” Professor Lambert laments. “But I guess it’s just not to be. Not if you’re not willing to take the plunge. Not if you’re clinging so tight to things that girls shouldn’t have. Perhaps you’ll just have to be a man after all.”

Have to be a man.

Those words feel like a death sentence. They plunge me back into confusion, new suggestions layering atop old, all sense of orientation and reason threatening to disappear into my mind’s fog as inevitability and desire go to war. I want to be a girl—but maybe I’m not. Perhaps I have to be a man after all, even though there’s nothing that horrifies me more. Dysphoria has me in its grip, and as I contemplate a life lived in that gender

—the wrong gender—it strikes me how foolish I’ve been. Professor Lambert has been nothing but helpful, and I have looked the gift horse in the mouth.

“S-s-sorry,” I beg. “I’m... sorry... I-I...”

“And what a man you’ll be.” The smile on Professor Lambert’s face warps into something awful and vindictive. I shrink from it. I can’t question her benevolence, so I’m forced to conclude that I deserve it. “Just look at yourself. Posing and preening like an effeminate freak. Unable to get hard. Obsessed with being like your sister, even though you never will. It’s pathetic. It’s disgusting.”

My self-esteem crumples utterly under the weight of the humiliation. Professor Lambert is right, as ever. The tattered remnants of my masculinity still have enough bite to them to ensure that I feel it bone deep. The gnawing shame at the thought of being that much of a failure of a man is haunting. An impotent, emasculated boy. It’s the very definition of a gender loser. But within this agony, there is a light that points the way. Somehow, the stinging arousal I feel as Professor Lambert humiliates me makes me feel as though, perhaps, I can still be what I want to be.

“Please!” I moan. “Please... I want... I w-want...”

“Oh? Yes?” Professor Lambert sips her drink, savoring my surrender. “You want to be a girl? You want to be a dim-witted, slutty, bimbo like your sister?”

I do. God, I do. “I... I...” But I can’t bring myself to say it. I still know, on some level, how wrong it would be to let my mind fall into that vapid abyss. It’s simply that I can’t face the alternative.”

“Failed boy, or dumb bimbo?” Professor Lambert presses. She’s shown me what gender truly is: power. She has it, and wields it against me like a sledgehammer to a marble statue. “Those are the only choices for a loser like you.”

“C... can’t...” Desperation commits me to foolish hubris. “C-c-can’t I be a s-smart woman l-like you?”

Professor Lambert’s laughter resounds, blacker and bleaker than ever before. The untempered, liberal, male-ally feminism I came to college with snaps like a twig in the face of her proud, defiant predation. “No. No, you can’t. I had to win the hard way. I had to learn the way the world works. You’re just a dumb little brat clinging to your own sister’s skirt. You’re nothing like me, and you never could be. Go ahead and put that idea out of your mind forever.”

It’s gone. Forever. For me, gender is binary. At least I get to make the choice for myself.

“Come on, Eve.” I’m at the brink, and she just keeps pushing. Her guidance is like the sun’s merciless glare. “What do you want? Tell me what you want.”

With that, the truth slips out. My will, far beyond its limit, gives up on agency itself. “I-I want you to decide for me!”

The professor’s eyes widen briefly in surprise. Like she can’t believe her luck. I’m shocked by my own words too. Shocked by the fact that, facing down a chemical lobotomy, I couldn’t even make up my own mind. It’s the final proof that I’m getting what I deserve. But at least I can satisfy myself that I’m doing the progressive thing. I’m letting a woman take charge.

Professor Lambert seizes on the opportunity. With gleeful fondness, she whispers words I will engrave on my heart. “Good girl.” The tears in my eyes become joyful again. It’s like I passed a test. I answered the way a girl should. Girls don’t need brains, and girls are entertainment. Why should we make decisions for ourselves? Professor Lambert takes yet another long drag on her cigarette, savors it for a long moment, and then blows it into my face. Greedily, guilty, I suck down my own obliteration, choking only a little as Professor Lambert focuses her gaze on mine. “Eve. You’re a stupid, airheaded, dim-witted, empty-headed bimbo. And that’s all you’ll ever be.”

For a moment, as her words become true, I have just enough awareness left to regret it.

With the drug still in my lungs, the suggestion hits me with the force of a sledgehammer. I sway, so light-headed I’m dizzy, and for a moment, I take it for nothing more than the effects of the secondhand smoke. But after a few seconds, as I begin sucking down fresh air, I realize that it’s getting worse, not better. The harder I try to bring everything back into focus, the more it slips out of reach—all of it. The day’s headlines, stray facts, the contents of my college degree—all retract as I reach for them, leaving at the heart of my being a yawning emptiness full of hot, pink air. My thoughts slow, thick as treacle. My dawning sense of incapacity both terrifies and excites me. I will never again follow an intelligent conversation. I will sit there, giggling, eyes wide and awestruck. I will be nothing more than decoration. I will never be taken seriously again.

It’s so humiliating. It’s so hot.

What haunts me as I diminish is the unshakable sense that a person is supposed to be more than this. I’ve seen first-hand what I am to become. Mari, my sister, is a mockery of feminism and womanhood, but that thought only works to damn me. After all, I want to be just like her. The certain knowledge that I will prompts a giggle from my lips. The first of many. All

the reasons I should resent and resist this—my values, my pride, my once-treasured masculinity—evaporate. I cannot understand them anymore. That’s embarrassing; it leaves me flustered, moaning, giggling. It gets me off. Girls don’t need brains. And I’m finally becoming a girl.

Amidst the fugue of my collapse, I look over at Mari. We share a look, and giggle together. I see myself reflected in her eyes. We’re the same. Vapid. Airheaded. Dumb. It’s a blissful thought. It’s all I ever wanted. I have a long way to go until I truly match up to her example, of course. But as ever, she is my role model. She’s shown me exactly what a girl is supposed to be.

And Professor Lambert is ready to show me so much more.

As I giggle and drool the last remaining intelligent thoughts out of my head forever, she slips out of her blazer and unfastens her belt. “Atta girl,” she pants lustfully. “Now let me teach you how a girl makes a woman feel good.”

Gender has teeth.

And, like, pills, and lasers, and needles, and scalpels, and all kinds of other scary stuff! I have to deal with it all, it’s sooooo hard. It hurts so bad, but I never complain. It’s just what I gotta do to be a girl. It’s crazy expensive too. I can’t keep track of the numbers, obviously. But Professor Lambert told me how to pay for it all. Something about, like borrowing against my college fund?

She’s soooo smart. Makes sense. She’s a woman. Not a girl like me.

I’m so so soooo grateful she helped through all those scary appointments. Loads of men in suits using words that give me the worst headache ever! I never get what they’re talking about until the professor says it in small words I can understand.

Big tits. Pretty face. Cute ass. No more gross hair. That’s what they’re giving me.

All the pain is totally worth it. And after a few years, my dream comes true. I’m finally just like my sister.

When I think about my big sis, Mari, I guess the first memory that pops into my silly head is of that first night I became a girl. Once the professor got done fucking my brains out, Mari took me back to her dorm room. She taught me, like, all kinds of stuff. It was super hard to follow at first, but she

was soooo patient and nice, and now it's all basically as easy as pie! Stuff like clothes, and lipstick, and how to grow out my hair. She's so nice to me. I couldn't ask for a better big sis. And after I was so, like, weird and mean and judgmental! Guess she could tell I was just projecting, or whatever. I asked her about it one time, and she said that, like, us girls just have to stick together. That's girl power for you!

And I guess the second memory that pops into my head is when we met up recently, after I got done recovering from getting my fake tits put in. It was like looking in a mirror. Professor Lambert was soooooo pleased. It's been super hard—she's made me eat a whole bunch, too. Something about wanting to make us a matching set? That's such a cute idea. She took us out to a bar in our pink tops and tight shorts, and people kept asking if we were, like, identical twins. Except, some of them used some big, fancy word for it. Monozy-something. They kept laughing at me when I couldn't even say it back to them.

It was really, really good. I love it when people affirm my gender.

Then the professor took us back to her place and had us make out a whole bunch. That was really hot too. I love it when she looks at us. At me. It feels so, so good to know I'm finally the girl I was, like, always meant to be. Born in the wrong body, as we say. Clearly, I was meant to be born into Mari's. I'm just like her now. It's all I ever wanted.

The only difference is that she has a pussy, and I have my perma-limp little clitty. Professor Lambert wants me this way. It always makes her laugh.

The only drag is, our parents have started being so annoying about all this stuff. I don't get it. They were totally supportive at first! But now they keep sending me all these weird texts, saying that they're, like, worried about me, or whatever. Ugh. Didn't realize they were so, like, bigoted. Our mom even says she's gonna come and take us home from college, which is really stupid cause I dropped out ages ago! I just like going to sorority parties.

But I think it's gonna be OK. Professor Lambert knows exactly what to do. She's so smart, and she always has a plan. She helped me get my silly little head around what's really going on.

Our mom is, like, this cool, high-powered career woman. But deep down, I think she's always wanted to be a girl.

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