

Ethan Goffman

A Real Man

“You’re not welcome here anymore, Fifi,” says George to me. “I found out who you really are.” And I’m kicked out of the cozy coffee shop that had been my temporary haven. “Leave at once.”

Abandoning my half-eaten cinnamon-apple muffin and my half-drunk latte, I slump my shoulders and stumble out on these horribly awkward heels I’m forced to wear, utterly visible, gaped at by swarms of eyes, in my bright pink miniskirt with orange and yellow parrots, part of the ridiculous wardrobe the Bureau permits me.

George is a big, friendly fellow who welcomed me, told me about his wife and family, didn’t mind my secrecy about my own past. “Hard times,” he asked the first time I came in.

“How can you tell?”

“After a few years at this job, you get a seventh sense. Welcome to the Cinnamon Twist. I’m George Johnson, the owner.”

I still consider him a friend, though I’ll doubtless never speak to him again. I’ve had a lot worse said when people find out I’m on the Bureau’s list, the most common being “I hope you get raped, bitch,” or some such doggerel. Me, an educated woman with a superb brain.

I live in a totalitarian country worse than any in history, a country ruled by a new kind of high-tech, narrow-minded fascism. It’s not the land of the free I grew up in, but a whole different place, controlling your thoughts and movements, where “punishment” is the most insidious imaginable.

I used to be comfortable in my own skin, a big, strong man, polite to women. Then the Bureau caught me.

It was like they say how you go bankrupt, little by little then all at once. Each day meant a cocktail of hormones and god-knows-what drugs forced down my throat, and into my veins. Each day, an enforced training in how to walk, how to talk, what to say, what to wear. During the process, the hair on my chest and legs shrunk away, breasts began to form. My arms and upper body shriveled, so that heavy lifting became a struggle—and lifting weights was completely forbidden. The mental torture was the worst, the relentless drilling to change every detail about how you think, the endless forced contrition.

After about three months, the day of the surgery came. Yanked from my tiny cell, already blanked-out on drugs and misery, I didn't resist, although they still kept me in cuffs on the way to the hospital. I awoke from the dark emptiness to find my manhood cut off, leaving a gaping hole between my legs and in my soul. Then they drove me, still hopped up on pain killers, to my tiny new apartment, scarcely bigger than my cell, pink paint and glamorous photos on the wall, perfume scented, all designed to drill femininity into my spirit, day after day, so that my mental state matched my physical body.

I'm even a woman in my dreams, mostly, although a struggling one, confused about details, whether my breasts are the right size, how to apply lipstick, how to walk in heels. Things I've been drilled on to the point of numbness until they become automatic, but have somehow forgotten, so I just stand there paralyzed. Once in a purple moon, I dream my old masculine self, back in the bars hunting for women or naked with an erection a foot long. Once it actually took the form of a giant hot dog and a luscious blonde bit down upon it, but I awoke screaming in pain as it bled and withered into nothingness.

They gave me a new job as a hostess at one of those clubs they've set up, not explicitly gay bars since a part of the unholy alliance that now rules this country would object. I think the purple paint and the huge photos of Prince and Marilyn Monroe surveilling the vast main room give it away, though, as do Bette Midler's incessant music or Judy Garland's wistful "Somewhere, Over the Rainbow."

I'm a pretty good hostess, take a little pride in it, chat people up a bit. As a man I was taciturn; now I'm a mildly chatty woman, superficially friendly. I don't want to know anything about the inner lives of the denizens who frequent the club, though.

I can never be who I once was, never feel comfortable approaching a soft, curvaceous woman again. Perhaps an effeminate man or a butch woman would want me—lord knows, there are plenty to choose from; the Bureau's seen to that. But I don't even try.

I do technically have some freedom but in a highly supervised way. I have protested several times to the low-level Bureau official, Hildy, assigned to supervise me. "Do you have to keep tracking all of my movements, phone calls, and Zoom chats? Can't you remove the surveillance from my apartment and give me some privacy, at least in the bathroom? I think I've proved my trustworthiness many times over. I think I've earned it."

"You made your choice long ago," Hildy told me. That's how it is with the Bureau. You can't reason with them. I'd have better luck negotiating with a blank wall. Although any wall anywhere could be bugged by the Bureau. It's like Winston Smith says in *1984*: all you have is the few square inches inside your own skull. Although the Bureau even monkeys with your thoughts, your inner identity.

Technically, I did sign papers agreeing to the operation, but in reality I was coerced. When you're in that prison cell, in solitary for long stretches, your mind goes little by little, then all at once. So, when you're told to sign something, you sign.

I admit, I kind of admire the Bureau's efficiency. They didn't want to pay for me to sit stewing in this cell my whole life—prisoners are expensive. A drain on society. So now I guess I'm a contributing citizen. Although of a disgusting society, full of lowlifes, if you ask me. Which nobody does.

As a woman, I'm allowed out in public only in an array of ultra-feminine dresses, with make-up and stylish hair, and those atrocious high heels. If I acted like a man, the bureau would put me through more of their "counseling," really a form of legalized torture. So I follow the instructions of my trainer from the transition, of the obligatory "reminder" lessons, of how to move, what to say, how to sway my hips when I walk, swish my dress, speak in a soft, feminine voice, and even how to call out "Hey, boys" to men and others acting the part. At least this helps get me better treatment in my job as hostess.

The Bureau was reluctant to allow me to return to any kind of night life outside of my new job. After a couple of years and repeated attempts at dealing with the bureaucracy, filling out multiple forms with the same dumb information over and over, apologizing for my horrible past in a variety of settings, breaking into real

tears several times—God, I’ve become a convincing woman—I was finally allowed to visit bars again. With a strict two-drink limit and 9 PM curfew.

Although I’ve confessed many times, both before and after the gender reassignment, of course it’s all bullshit—I feel no remorse whatsoever. I don’t dare express any of this, though, except here in the inner temple of my thoughts.

As a woman, I do sometimes get treated nicely by men. Some hold open doors, even occasionally buy me a drink when I go to real bars, the kind of places with real men just like the old me. Of course, the thought of actually touching any of these men disgusts me, and I’ve had to walk away (after enjoying the free drink). “What’s the matter, playing hard to get,” they would say, and I’d leave them a fake number or email. Then I’d move on to a new bar.

All of this gave me no joy, not like it used to. That’s why I gave up my new night life. And that’s why I was so happy to discover the Cinnamon Twist and a whole new set of people to talk to. The Cinnamon Twist even has some attractive women regulars who have become moderately friendly. There’s Maggie, the nurse with the bright red hair, and Cindy, the executive secretary with an adorable flicker of a smile. Although they don’t doll up like the bar hoppers. And they would never think to flirt with me. Most likely, they suspected my condition and spoke to me out of pity. And what would I do if I got them into bed? I briefly imagine trying woman to woman. I yearn to own a lovely young body, but that’s no longer possible. Besides, long before I had my way the Bureau’s goons would burst in, guns drawn, with flashing blue and yellow lights and screaming sirens invading my tiny apartment.

I had a dream the other night. I was in my old body, rippling with muscles, tall and confident like King Kong. A real man. I was with Susie again, one of my marks, and I’d lured her back to my apartment. “Time for some rough games,” I said, swinging open the door to my bedroom, allowing her to peek at my devices, my favorite torture table with the chains and whips.

“What the hell,” she slurred. “This isn’t funny. I want to go home.”

“It’s too late,” I said, grabbing her. “You don’t know what you’ve signed up for.” With the drinks, and the sedative I’d slipped her, she was in no state to even consider resisting.

I would have awoken from that dream with a hard-on, but that's no longer possible. Instead, I was jolted awake by flashing lights and Hildy's voice: "Wake up this instant, Fifi!"

"What the hell," I screamed.

"We have evidence you're having forbidden thoughts."

That's how it is with the Bureau. They know your thoughts somehow, monitoring your very sleep. That's the horrible life we live now in this totalitarian excuse for a country.