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Tales of Light and Darkness

Tales of Light and Darkness: three dark fantasies told from a transgendered perspective. Contents include:

The Shop at the End of the Road: a teenaged boy strikes a Faustian bargain with an ageless woman, incurring a debt that can never be repaid...

Stepping Over: a subtle rift in time and space allows nine-year old Kim Taylor a glimpse into a life he might have led...

Tell Me True: a mysterious door leads to a world of secret, feminine delights for one lonely, neglected little boy...

Originally published on BCTS, the trilogy has been revised and formatted for instant download. Clocking in at just under 20,000 words, **Tales of Light and Darkness** has been released into the public domain by the author.

Cynosure Collected Fiction



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THE SHOP AT THE END OF THE ROAD

Angie Holbrook

1.

There was a shop on the outskirts of town, one of those magical little places that seemed to sell nothing but half-remembered dreams and broken promises. It sat at the end of a long forgotten cul-de-sac, nestled amongst the elms and maples, idling away its days in a seemingly eternal springtime. Its only customers were small children, fallen teenagers and forlorn lovers, all seeking answers to unspoken questions.

The answers were supplied by a dark-eyed woman who sat behind an ancient cedarwood counter. She greeted her clientele with an indulgent smile, her lips curving in a startling, gloss red crescent, a gilt-edged deck of tarot cards splayed beneath her lacquered fingertips. As young and ageless as a waxworks gipsy, she watched in tacit amusement while her visitors foraged through the racks and shelves at the back of the store. Few could explain precisely what they sought, but each knew the moment they found it, squirreled away amongst the books and bells and Halloween masks.

Sometimes they might search for days, drawn inexorably back to the shop with its country-fair collection of everyday marvels. Opera glasses and china dolls; pocket watches and baseball cards; black satin gloves and the sweet, mocking lies of a beautiful woman. It was a museum of the strange, the exotic and the wonderful, housing a thousand scattered fragments of a thousand scattered lives. Trade was never brisk, but no one who entered the premises ever left empty handed. The Shop at the End of the Road sold everything. The cost was naturally excessive, but then again, happiness never comes cheap.

Happiness comes at a price very few could afford – and which *none* could ever resist.

2.

Robin Lindale walked in the deep green shade by the side of the road, eyes glinting in the late September sunshine. He strode the verdant lanes with a light, easy step, meeting the world with a gaze that could calm an angry sea. Fair and slight and willow thin, he possessed a naive beauty that drew the eye of everyone who saw him. Many would turn to remark on his lush, Autumn features, thinking him a girl hiding beneath a boy's careless denims. Their unsuspecting whispers often brushed the truth, although no one would have guessed what lay concealed below Robin's alabaster countenance.

He was on his way to The Shop at the End of the Road, treading a path he'd followed since early childhood. A life-long devotee of the arcane and the inexplicable, Robbie had become the Shop's sole regular customer. Its dark, aromatic interior had held him entranced from the moment he'd stepped through its leadlight doorway half a decade before. His once-intermittent journeys were now a regular pilgrimage, a ritual he observed with an almost Catholic devotion. Like most children his age, Robbie was a creature of custom and ceremony. The Shop was a great unspoken mystery in a grey pedestrian world, and his life would have been incomplete without this weekly dedication.

He approached the store through a grove of pines clustered around the front entrance. In previous centuries, the Shop had been a small parish church with bluestone walls and mahogany floorboards. Stained-glass windows lent it a surreal quality much in keeping with the owner's

Gothic personality. Robbie had always found this melancholy atmosphere vaguely menacing, like the moaning of the wind through a moonlit graveyard. He trotted up the front steps, inhaling an intoxicating mixture of Indian Rose and pine resin.

He paused just inside the threshold, adjusting his vision to the perpetual night inside. Dim, looming shapes gradually resolved themselves into art deco lampshades and glass-topped display cabinets. Nothing looked familiar; the merchandise altered from day to day like the colors of an April sunset. Robin stood silhouetted in the wide Victorian doorframe, savoring the fresh aura of mystery.

Then: a distant, nocturnal voice, drifting through the darkness:

"Hello Robbie."

The woman behind the counter waited in a pool of indigo shadows, silently reading the inscrutable cards with her long, spiderling fingers. She didn't need to look up to know who had entered her store. She divined the future the way the blind read brail, and was rarely – if ever – caught off guard. Long accustomed to her enigmatic presence, Robin approached her with the careless trust of a five year-old.

"Hi Felicity," he replied, using the name she'd told him to use, which wasn't her name at all. He halted before the counter, glancing absently down at the Tarot cards. Her finger hovered over The Queen, an image which held a special significance for the boy. It always turned face up whenever he entered the store.

"Earlier than usual," Felicity commented indifferently.

"Yeah, I thought I'd drop in before the place got too crowded," Robbie replied ingenuously, unaware that such a comment could easily be misconstrued as the grossest sarcasm. Felicity dealt another card, whicker-flicking it into place with a dark, effortless grace.

"Seven of Cups," she remarked, unsurprised. *Mystic numbers and the search for meaning.*

"Cool," Robin nodded as if he understood the first thing about the Tarot, then looked towards the back of the shop. Like everyone who came here, Robbie was searching for *something* – though he wasn't sure how to describe what it was at this point. It was kind of silly, kind of embarrassing, now that he stopped to think about it. Maybe if he just went out back and had a look round ...

"Felicity, would it be OK if I – " he began, inclining his head towards the old Lady Chapel. A crumbling, circular alcove packed with skirts, trinkets and hat-boxes, it was sure to house the object of his desires.

"Of course," the woman agreed in a subtle, knowing tone Robbie was too young to recognize. He was thirteen, and a boy; guile was an artform beyond his understanding. He sauntered into the rear of the store, past a framed poster advertising a French magician named Robert-Houdin (*Suspension Chloroform*, the legend read). He felt confident that he'd locate his prize out in the Lady Chapel or some other part of The Shop. That was the true enchantment of Felicity's place; nothing was ever out of reach if you sought hard enough.

3.

It was odd – as a little boy, he'd thought the Shop was a kind of shrine dedicated to lost toys. Week after week he'd foraged through the shelves, discovering things he imagined only existed in his dreams – matchbox cars and Radio Flyers and Ty Cobb baseball cards and Screamin' Demon motorcycles and Major Matt Masons and about a million other fabulous treasures he'd never seen before but felt he couldn't live without.

Recently, he'd begun to notice a more adult content lining the shelves; the memories and snapshots of a vanished generation. Crystal perfume atomizers with big, squishy bulbs. Vintage

cash registers. Pin-up calendars from the late fifties. Gold-plated Dunhill lighters. Norman Rockwell prints from the Saturday Evening Post. A signed copy of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album in its original sleeve. An endless stream of postwar trivia which never ceased to fire his imagination.

Today, of course, Robin was after something completely different.

He was no longer a child. He was growing up. Baseball gloves, *Sandman* comics and pressed vinyl had lost their appeal. He'd uncovered a well of fantasy in the depths of his mind; a shadow world swarming with moist, sultry images. They were things he'd spied here a hundred times in the past but had never really noticed until now. Silk scarves. Lace gloves. Glossy black stilettos. Long satin evening gowns that clung to the body like a gleaming second skin. Signature *Dior* stockings with French heels and seams running up the back.

It was a parade of the sensual, the feminine and the seductive, one which frightened and captivated him in equal degrees. This fascination had built up over the last six months, forming in the centre of his being like a ball of liquid silver. It had haunted his sleep, hounded his waking hours. And the strangest thing was –

Something had happened last week, something which had released all the pent-up heat simmering in the pit of his belly. It wasn't the first time it had happened, but the experience had never been so intense. It had occurred in the space of a few moments, striking him with the force of a biblical revelation, altering his perceptions at the most intrinsic level. And although he didn't realize it, Robbie had been changing for a long time, ever since the hair had started to sprout beneath his arms. His thoughts had grown increasingly more complex, his desires more abstract. Like all teenagers, Robbie yearned for things he couldn't name, couldn't understand, couldn't escape. Mirages in the desert, shadows he could see but simply couldn't touch.

Which was all that The Shop had ever sold, ultimately.

4.

He hunted around the Lady Chapel for over an hour, heart pounding with excitement as he glimpsed his prize lying just beyond the next hanger. Invariably, the 'prize' turned out to be a delusion, a trick of the dim, stained-glass light and days of unresolved fantasies. Sighing with frustration, Robbie moved on to deceive himself yet again, wading through tier upon tier of glistening silk. The Chapel appeared much bigger than he'd originally thought. He could have wandered through the racks for weeks, inspecting every dress, skirt and blouse by hand. Everything he found seemed to mock his efforts, tormenting him with its blatant, overstated femininity.

He finally emerged from the alcove, shaking his head in bewilderment, his face a mask of distraction. In all the years he'd frequented The Shop, he'd never walked away disappointed. Today, however, his goal had eluded him over and over, fading through his fingers like a will-of-the-wisp. He sauntered back through the store patting the dust off his shoulders, casting baffled glances around the shelves.

"Didn't find what you wanted?" Felicity asked, her tone more statement than question.

"No, I didn't ..." Robbie agreed, confusion etched on his innocent, doll-like features, "I was sure I'd find it back there somewhere ..."

"Answers are never where you first look for them," she commented, dealing another hand. The Tarot was laid out in a straight line across the counter, the cards face down and completely mute.

"I wasn't looking for answers," the boy replied without thinking, "I was just looking for –"

Felicity's eyes flashed up, huge and predatory: the eyes of a vengeful barn-owl, the eyes of a

hungry jaguar.

"Yes?"

I – well, I wasn't ..." Robin stumbled through his response, his complexion darkening several shades. What was he doing, blurting out his story like some little kid with a secret too big to hide? He was practically dancing from foot to foot in consternation. How could he tell her what he *really* wanted? He doubted he could have told anybody.

"I wasn't really looking for anything," he finally explained, knowing how lame that sounded. Hands thrust into bottomless pockets, he lowered his gaze to the floor.

"Really?" Felicity enquired with some amusement. *Whicker-flick*: two more cards from either side of the deck. Two seconds passed. Four. Then:

"Yeah, OK, I was. But it isn't here."

"Isn't it?" Whicker-flick, whicker flick, the sound of Christmas beetles taking flight.

"No, it's not," Robbie frowned unconsciously, "at least, I don't *think* it is."

Another brief lull, punctuated by the soft clip of cards on a woodgrain surface. Robin fidgeted uncomfortably, feeling cold tension building up around him like static electricity. He waited out the taut moments in an Alpine sweat, knowing there was more to be said, more to reveal, more to confess.

"All right," he said helplessly, "It's here somewhere. I ... I just didn't know how to ask for it."

Felicity nodded, as if expecting no more from him.

"Bring that stool over here," she said, leaning back from the counter, "it's time I read your fortune. When was the last time you turned the cards, Robbie?"

"I...don't know. Never, I suppose." He felt around in his pocket for loose change, wondering how much she was going to charge him. Being thirteen, he was pretty much skint from stem to stern. Maybe coming down here today hadn't been such a great idea after all. You probably couldn't buy the meaning of life with four dollars worth of plugged nickels, even in a place like this.

"Don't worry about *that* now," Felicity said, absently reading his mind, "you've come here every Saturday for the last five years, so we can afford to settle the accounts later." Robin nodded, not really understanding what she meant, but feeling absurdly flattered, nonetheless. He watched in dawning fascination while her fingers skittered over the cards, rearranging them into a perfect gipsy fantail. She flipped the last one with a kind of spontaneous expertise, the result of decades of training. It housed the picture of a young man dressed in medieval costume, blond locks hanging down to his shoulders. The Youth.

"A child's desires are easily satisfied, Robbie. They change by the hour, flowing like treacle over the tongue. Warm and sweet, but empty of all substance. First time you came here, the shelves were lined with toys and baubles. All you saw for three years were gameboys, skateboards and catcher's mitts." She paused, grinning at some private joke, then concluded: "Snips and snails and puppy dog's tails – that's what Robbie's dreams are made of."

Robin blinked several times, sensing an undertone of taunt in the woman's chirping nursery rhyme. Her hands sparrows over the cards once more, upturning an armored figure astride an angry black stallion. The Knight of Swords.

"A man's desires are equally vain. Visions of wealth and conquest; the power to prove his courage. His masculinity. His innate superiority. They still come in here now and then, blustering like feudal lords, demanding respect they've never earned. Know what they see? Easy solutions. Pheromone sprays, MK-20s, platinum visacards. Shortcuts to happiness, or what they believe is happiness. For some it's an unlimited supply of viagra. For others, it 's the keys to a sixty-three Mustang. Anything to bolster their pathetic male egos.

"But that's not what *you're* looking for, is it Robbie?"

He shook his head. Whatever he wanted, it had nothing to do with validating his masculinity. Felicity smiled again, exposing brilliantly white, even teeth.

"No, of course not. Being neither child nor adult, your interests are more intricate. They're mysterious, esoteric, unresolved. Things you can neither see nor touch, except in the deepest part of the night, when you drift between the waking and sleeping worlds." Her fingers hovered over another card, centre of the spread. "What were you looking for, Robbie?"

The boy opened his mouth to answer, to spill out his burden of shattered hopes, but fought back the words with all his strength. Years of secrecy and self-denial shackled his tongue. This was a facet of his personality he'd been concealing all his life, one he could barely admit to himself. How could he discuss this with her, with anybody? He drew back in an agony of self-defeat, unable to even glance in her direction.

"I can't tell you," he said in a small, drowning voice.

5.

A frigid silence chilled the air between them. Felicity transfixed the boy with an ebony stare. Robbie withered in that arctic gaze, a deep carmine flush invaded his features. Nothing was said for several moments, then Felicity began gathering up the cards with an air of weary dismissal, her expression one of vague distaste.

"We have nothing further to discuss."

Robbie felt a surge of panic. What had he done? She'd been trying to help him, to offer him a solution, and he'd missed his chance. His window of opportunity had closed – probably forever. Worse than that, he'd insulted her in some obscure way he didn't quite understand. He could see that now, see it in the sharp angle of her spine, the harsh set of her features. She was the one person who might comprehend the doubt and confusion he'd been feeling - and he'd pushed her away with a few careless words.

"No, wait," he cried (a little more desperately than he'd intended), leaning half-way over the counter, "you don't understand, Felicity. I ... I can't talk about this, really I can't! It's too embarrassing, too – " he groped for the word – "humiliating. Whenever I think about it, I feel..."

Unable to continue, Robin looked down at his hands, allowing the sentence trail off into oblivion. He tried to start over: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to – "

"Do you *trust* me Robbie?" Felicity asked, cutting him off.

"Yes," the boy nodded, hesitantly.

"Then listen carefully. As I said before, the answers are never where you first look for them. Sometimes you have to take risks, venture into places you'd rather not go. Places that frighten you, the way a child fears a darkened room. The problem is; you're no longer a child, Robbie. No one is going to hold your hand now. If you want to explore that darkened room, you have to enter alone ... and face whatever waits within."

Robin nodded, saying nothing.

"You came here today because you wanted something," the woman continued, "something so magical and terrifying that you can't bring yourself to ask for it by name. And here you face a paradox, Robbie. Because what you want – what you *need* so desperately – has no real name."

And she was right. There were words – alien, clinical words he'd read in textbooks and heard on documentaries – but they couldn't begin to describe the complicated emotions he'd experienced in the preceding weeks. *Transvestite*. *Transgendered*. *Transsexual*. Sterile, technical, lacklustre terms. Robbie knew precisely what they meant, but the meanings themselves were irrelevant. As she'd said, what he wanted had no *real* name.

"What can I do?" He asked, teetering on despair.

"Give it a name."

"I can't. I ... I don't know how to put it into words."

"You don't *want* to put it into words Robbie. You want the answer, but you don't want to ask the question. You want the cake but you don't want to cook. You want the gain, but not the pain. Like all men, you want The Easy Solution." She measured him with a dry, leveling glance. "I thought you were different."

"I am!" he almost wailed. This wasn't right, she wasn't being fair. He *was* different, he'd been made to feel different from the moment he started school. Rejected and ostracized from day one, he'd endured the contempt and loathing of virtually everybody he knew. The big kids in the playground. Mr Grady, his gym coach. Mrs Lorris, his homeroom teacher. The old geezer who mopped out the hallway back in grade school, the one who used to call him 'Rosebud' under his breath. Jesus, his own parents on occasion, when his effeminate ways embarrassed them in public. How could he explain that to her, make her see what an ugly, pointless waste his existence had become?

She already knows.

The thought flashed across his mind like summer lightning: she knew. She'd always known. She'd known from the morning he'd stepped across The Shop's tiled threshold five years ago. Even then, she'd known everything about him, known him better than his own Mother. Every hair, every pore, every flickering eyelash. The Tarot had told her, whispered his story through her gliding fingertips, slowly disrobing his fragile soul until he was left naked and shivering in the night.

"You already know what I want," he said, his voice wavering on the verge of tears.

"Yes." Her tone was calm, unperturbed, almost serene. Robbie gaped in surprise. He'd expected a laugh, a denial, a knowing smirk; anything but indifferent confirmation.

"Then why won't you give it to me?"

"Because you're not a child, Robbie. As I told you before: if you really want this, you have to ask for it. By name." She started rearranging the cards once more, laying them out in a rough semi-circle. "There's an old saying, no doubt you've heard it: Money can't buy happiness. It's true. Money can buy anything *except* happiness." The cards now formed a tight, gold-rimmed crescent moon, the horns pointing in Robbie's direction. "But that doesn't mean happiness comes free."

"I only have five dollars," he said automatically, not really understanding what she'd meant.

"Four ninety-eight," she corrected with a throw-away gesture, "but that doesn't matter: your money's no good here, as they used to say back in Vegas." A fond, nostalgic look passed over her face, as if she were recalling a dear, years-lost friend. She went on: "You can't buy what you want, Robbie, not anymore. The price is more than you could possibly afford. Bill Gates couldn't afford what you want, trust me."

"Then how – ?" Robin began, his voice quailing with anguish. Why was she doing this, why was she torturing him with these lying riddles? She was playing with him, a cruel, teasing game he felt compelled to play against his will. His head was reeling with the contradictions: *yes*, I have what you want, but *no*, you can't have it. *Yes*, you can buy it, but *no*, you can't. *Yes*, I'm going to help you: *no*, I won't. What was going on? Felicity had never treated him this way before. She was offering him false hope in one hand and an empty promise in the other. He felt cheated, tricked, betrayed.

I thought you liked me, he thought, feeling his heart sink with lonely, child-like hurt.

"I do," Felicity told him, as if he'd spoken the words aloud (which he had, without realizing it), "that's why we're having this conversation. I like you quite a lot, Robbie. Very few of my customers have shown such dedication over the years. Unfortunately, I can't simply give you the answer to all your prayers. There are rules about these things. I'm not a genie, I don't grant

wishes. Get that part absolutely clear in your mind. This is a place of business, Robbie, which means we have to strike a bargain."

"A ... *bargain*?" The boy replied uneasily. The conversation was taking on rather a macabre tone, as if he was bartering for his soul. Reading his expression (or maybe his mind, let's get it out in the open), Felicity flashed him another wolfish, predatory smile, freezing the blood in his veins.

"A *deal*, anyway. Reach an agreement, negotiate a contract. Make an exchange. The way things were done back in the olden days, before there were books or banks or money."

"What else can I give you?" Robbie asked in the tiny, strangled voice he'd used earlier. Knowledge crept over him in a slow revelation. She had trapped him, backed him into a corner with her willful deceits and manipulations. Why in God's name was she doing this? What could she possibly gain?

Felicity's hand drifted over the cards.

"Tell me what you were looking for, Robbie."

The boy opened his mouth, attempting to reply, but the words refused to budge. They caught in his throat like fish in a net, struggling to escape back to the depths. He didn't want to tell her, didn't want to abase himself before this strange, fathomless woman. It would be a humiliation beyond endurance. But what choice did he have? She had deprived him of all options, all alternatives. Inhaling a deep, calming breath, Robbie forced out his answer:

"I was looking for a dress."

6.

"No." Felicity shook her head, not unkindly. "You weren't looking for a dress. You were looking for something else. That's why you couldn't find it."

Robbie considered this for a few moments, peering into the cloistered depths of the Lady Chapel. What he sought *should* have been in there, hidden amongst the racks and stacks and camphor chests. Several times, he'd reached into the cluttered rows, only to grasp a fading mirage. It was always on the edge of his vision, hanging just beyond the point of recognition.

Yet suddenly, there it was, as plain as the frost on an autumn lawn. He looked back at Felicity, blinking the doubt from his eyes.

"You're right," he said in a surprisingly steady voice, "it's not *just* the dress I want. It's... everything that goes *with* it."

Felicity smiled indulgently, as if dealing with a slow and rather ungrateful student.

"I doubt *that* very much," she replied, turning three cards over in quick succession, "but we seem to have made some progress." A vague shadow passed over her features while she studied the final hand. Close though he was, Robbie couldn't quite make out the configuration. All of the sigils seemed to blend into a meaningless jumble, perhaps because he didn't want to know what the future held for him.

Felicity flipped the cards face down once more, seeming to reach a decision.

"You want to be a girl."

"Yes."

"Do you know what you're asking?"

"Yes," he nodded without hesitation, though he actually had no idea whatsoever. Nor did he honestly care at this point: Robbie knew what he *wanted*, and that was enough. More than enough, in fact.

"And you ask this of your own free will?"

Far away in the back of the shop, an ancient chrome pendulum ticked away the distant

seconds. Robbie studied the dark woman's face, aware that this was his last chance to back out, to leave by the front door and simply accept whatever the world had to offer a boy of thirteen.

"Yes."

"All right, then. Come with me."

Felicity rose from her chair, leaving the Tarot behind on the counter, and walked quietly through the archway of the Lady Chapel. Robbie followed in a kind of plodding fugue, chill fingers teasing up and down his spine. The enormity of his decision struck him with appalling force: there would be no turning back now, no compromises or negotiations. The bargain had been struck, the contract sealed, and the conditions were binding. *In perpetuity.*

What had he done?

What *had* he done?

Before he could pursue this line of thought any further, Felicity halted before a changing booth at the very back of the Chapel. Robbie stared at it in dull wonder – he must have walked past it at least a thousand times over the last five years. How could he have *never* noticed it before?

"You weren't looking for it until today," Felicity answered his unspoken question.

A sleek, iridescent curtain was drawn across the booth's opening, the glossy fabric framed by a pallid, moonlight glow from within. Robbie stepped carefully forward, mesmerized by the pulsing radiance surrounding the doorway. He waved his right hand slowly through the air and was startled to see an after-image trailing in its wake.

"You'll find what you seek in there," Felicity told him, pointing a jeweled finger towards the cubicle. Her words were flat and hollow, like the ritual chant of a litany. There was none of the cheerful malice he'd heard in their earlier conversations. All pretence had been dropped. As far as she was concerned, this was a business transaction, nothing more.

And it was time to pay the piper.

Eyes locked on the curtain, Robbie started fishing about in his hip pocket, withdrawing a handful of loose change. Four ninety-eight, exactly as she'd predicted. He deposited two crumpled bills and a scattering of coins in her upraised palm, barely aware of what he was doing. Felicity stepped discreetly to one side in a sweep of gypsy silks, her role in the drama fulfilled.

Robbie edged closer to the shimmering veil, fingers extended like a sleepwalker. His pupils were dilated, his lips slightly parted. He should have been frightened – *terrified*, in fact – but the thought of running never occurred to him. The light was seductive, entrancing. He *had* to know what was hidden behind the veil.

"Felicity?" he asked in a daze.

"Yes?"

"What's *in* there?"

"Everything you've ever wanted."

He drew in a long breath, catching an unusual scent in the air. Something wistful, delicate, almost imperceptible. It wasn't the incense that normally permeated the atmosphere of the store. No, it was much finer than that; a sweet, subtle aroma that flowed like a breeze across an open wheat field.

"What's in there?" he repeated in a hushed, awed whisper. His gaze never left the curtain; serpents and firebirds swirled hypnotically across his field of vision. The light appeared to be bleeding out from behind the draperies, enveloping him in fluid, opalescent waves.

He surrendered himself without conscious thought, feeling his body shift and melt away into nothingness.

Felicity watched dispassionately as Robin Lindale vanished from the world, dwindling away like a dream forgotten in the morning hours. He expired into non-existence with little more than

a sigh, leaving behind only his wasted hopes and fruitless desires, sole witnesses to his empty, meaningless life. Not even a void was left by his passing: time flowed and shifted around spot where he'd stood, erasing his presence from all human memory...

With only one exception.

"Goodbye Robbie," Felicity said to the empty store, and receded back into the shadows from which she had originally sprung.

The End

STEPPING OVER

Tracy Lane

I.

It was Saturday morning in the second week of spring, and nine year-old Kim Taylor was practically busting to get out of the house.

Leaning out of the window of his upstairs bedroom, Kim gazed across the lawns and fences of Heartsfield. The air still carried a hint of winter; he could taste it on the back of his tongue as he breathed. A deep, clear sky framed the distant mountains, lazy white clouds drifted sedately across the horizon. Too nice a morning to spend in front of the TV, no matter what was on. The day beckoned him with all the promises of childhood - some of which he was still too young to understand.

He'd promised to meet Janet and Suzie at the playground around half-twelve, which was why he'd grabbed lunch early today. His Mom was really big on the three squares thing and she wouldn't let him out the door without a bite or two. Well, she couldn't complain he wasn't getting his daily ration; he'd downed three BLTs and a glass of Quik only half an hour before. He'd also cleaned up his room, just in case she tried to hold him on a technicality. Mothers were like that, they almost never played fair.

Closing the window, Kim walked over to the dresser, keeping one eye to the clock. It was quarter of twelve; still plenty of time to get down to Memorial Park if he left in the next ten minutes or so. He passed a brush over his hair and tucked his t-shirt into his jeans, making sure to tighten the belt a notch. Unlike most boys his age, Kim was small and delicately built; it was difficult to find clothes that fit him. Even with his hair cropped to the nape of his neck, strangers regularly mistook him for a young girl (a situation causing him considerable embarrassment until quite recently).

Grooming rituals completed, he stepped into his runners (thick, pumpy Docs, roughly three sizes too big) and made for the door. All he had to do now was sneak past the Guardian of the Living Room and he'd be home free. Unfortunately, this final obstacle was also the most difficult to avoid, as his Mom had eyes like a proverbial hawk. Worse still, he knew she was getting curious about how he was spending his afternoons, which meant she would probably go fishing for answers.

And that might pose a few problems.

Kim trotted down the staircase, wondering how he was going to handle this. He wasn't old enough to deceive her (the woman was a human polygraph), but he obviously couldn't tell her

everything - not even the parts she'd be capable of believing. Trouble was, she wouldn't let him leave until she'd satisfied her interest. Well, some of it, at least. Maybe that was his solution; throw her a couple of tidbits. Not too much; just enough to keep her guessing.

His mother was stretched out on the sofa, languidly reading one of her Anne Rice novels. This was a familiar scene: Lynne Taylor was a binge reader with a preference for the supernatural. *The Vampire Chronicles* was her all-time favorite, she must have read it at least sixteen times, as if searching for passages she hadn't noticed before. Kim honestly had no idea what the attraction was. Once you read a book you already knew how it ended. There was no point in reading it again from what he could see.

Kim approached the foot of the lounge with all the caution of a mouse approaching a sleeping lioness.

"Can I go out now, Mom?" he asked, trying hard not to shuffle his feet.

"Cleaned up your room?" Lynne asked without looking up.

"Yeah," Kim replied with an absent-minded nod.

"OK, then," Lynne said indifferently, "where are you going?"

"Down to the Park," the boy answered, "I'm meeting J and S at the swings."

Lynne glanced up, eyebrows arched with uncharacteristic surprise.

"J and S?"

"Janet and Susie."

"And who might *they* be?"

"Some girls in my class," Kim told her conversationally, "we catch the bus to school together. They live out in Chamberlain Heights."

"Oh, Chamberlain Heights," Lynne smiled, putting on her best *la-de-da* accent, "moving up in the world, are we?" Kim was aware that she was trying to reel him in with a touch of humour, but he didn't understand what she meant. He shrugged, not really sure how to reply.

"Yeah, I guess so."

Lynne stared at him a few seconds longer, studying his expression, his posture, the lowering of his gaze. He was holding something back, obviously, although he looked more uncomfortable than secretive. Well, whatever it was, it couldn't have been anything too serious. He was nine years old, how serious could it be? Probably just embarrassed about having a little girlfriend or something. Well, whatever it was, she could afford to be patient. She'd find out everything eventually. She always did.

"All right then," Lynne nodded, turning back to her book, "have a nice day with your friends." Casually turning a dog-eared page between her fingertips, she signaled that their audience was finished.

Kim said goodbye and exited the room, hoping to avoid further questioning. He made it as far as the hallway before she issued the usual reminders, almost as an afterthought: "Dinner's at five. And be careful crossing the road."

"Yes, Mom," he called back, and let himself out through the front door. A fine day greeted him with a freshening breeze. He was glad to be out in the fresh air, away from his mother's interrogations. He could see that she'd been surprised he was meeting a couple of girls at the playground and would have given her eye-teeth to know what was going on. And that would have been a little difficult to explain, particularly since J & S weren't really his friends.

They were *Kitty's* friends.

Kim ambled along the sidewalk swinging his arms, watching dragonflies zither across the nature strip. Memorial Park was five blocks up the Drive, about fifteen minutes' walk from his place. Except he wasn't heading for Memorial Park, not exactly. He was heading for the playground, just as he'd told his mother, but it had a different name over there. A lot of things had

different names over there, come to think of it.

Over there.

That was his name for Kitty's world. That land of wonders he'd discovered almost a year ago, when he'd learnt that dreams weren't always dreams. It was a place of infinite possibilities, where fantasies came true and there was no need to keep secrets from anyone, least of all his mother.

Over There.

Crossing the road at Lethbridge Canal, Kim turned left into Memorial Drive. The Drive was the main street of Heartsfield, running the length of the town and dividing it neatly in two. Hopscotch grids decorated its sidewalks with meticulous regularity, shaded by the leaves of a thousand maples. Kim knew every crossing, curb and corner of the Drive, because he'd lived here all his life.

Heartsfield was your archetypal picket-fence township, a picture-postcard village nestled around the foothills of the Chamberlain Ranges. It was pretty much the same in Kitty's world as it was in his; chalk-white footpaths and tree-lined avenues. You could almost smell the cinnamon pie cooling on every second windowsill. His Mom adored the place, said it had a Norman Rockwell feel to it. Kim didn't know who Norman Rockwell was, but the sentiment was clear enough.

Kitty's town was virtually identical, only it was called Hartsvale on her side. Kim supposed the similarity wasn't purely coincidental; everything in Hartsvale was like a reflection of Heartsfield. He'd seen something similar on Star Trek, one time - that episode where Worf found himself falling through a bunch of quantum realities (whatever they were) and everyone seemed to have a double. Which was how things were in Kitty's world. It was like everybody he knew had a twin, someone who looked and acted the same as their counterpart.

Kitty Tyler was his twin, in a way.

Yes, she was a girl, and she wore dresses and ribbons and everything, but she was his twin nonetheless. He'd realized that the very first time he'd "stepped over" to the other side, nearly a year before. It didn't matter that she wore panties and skipped rope and slept with a cuddly panda in her arms every night. They were so similar, so alike in every other respect. The cast of their features, set of their gaze, the very color of their thoughts. Yes, Kitty Tyler was his twin in every sense of the word.

His twin, and much more besides.

2.

Kim continued along Memorial Drive until he reached the trail winding down to the Park. This was his doorway to the other side, the path leading into Kitty's world. Pinecones and woodchips crunched beneath his feet as he descended through the trees, fresh woodland scents prickled his nose. Checking his watch, he saw it was nearly twelve. J & S would probably be on their way right now, so he had to get a move on.

It was time to Step Over.

That was how he thought of it - taking one giant stride into another land, like in the story of the seven league boots. Even now, almost a year since he'd started migrating, the whole process had a bizarre, surreal quality about it. Some days, it was like waking up in some weird, never-ending fairy tale. Then again, there were times - such as today - when it all seemed completely normal.

Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he disappeared into the pine glade that bordered the playground. He had to find an isolated spot where he could be certain no one was watching. Kim wasn't sure what actually happened when he Stepped Over, but he didn't want any

witnesses all the same. For all he knew, he might actually vanish into thin air - and that would have been downright impossible to explain.

Once inside The Glade, Kim stood quietly in the shade, preparing to make the transfer. He had to clear his mind, reach across that vast, yawning chasm separating their two worlds. It was like looking up into the night sky and feeling yourself fall into it; reaching that instant of perfect balance dividing a dream from reality. Shinto monks called it the Point of Tau, a state of perfect equilibrium between all the universal forces. It took decades to achieve through fasting and meditation, but Kim had an innate grasp of the process. And that was what made it all possible.

The transfer took place in a fraction of a second.

Kim felt the universe shifting around him, the barriers of reality dissolving like mist before the sun. More than that, he felt his body melt and run inside its skin. Long blond hair swept down past his shoulders, unrolling like a platinum curtain. He was changing, altering. His clothes faded from his limbs as the transformation took effect. Looking down, he had a blurred image of naked flesh morphing between genders. Her clothing flickered back into existence, too fast for the eye to follow. First the underwear, materializing out of nowhere; then the dress, running down her hips in a golden wave. Glittering lights swept across her field of vision, blinding her momentarily -

And suddenly, she was standing beneath a grove of Cypress trees, blinking into a cool April morning. The transfer was finished, she'd Crossed Over from Kim's world.

Looking down, Kitty saw she was wearing a bright yellow sunfrock, the kind with buttons down the front and puffy sleeves on the shoulders. It was one of her favourites, sheer and light as summer breeze. It was funny; jeans and sweatshirts felt perfectly normal back on the Other Side, but once she'd crossed over, Kitty tended to view boy's clothing with vague distaste (particularly the underwear - who in their right mind would want to wear something so indisputably hideous as a pair of jockey shorts?!)

Checking the rest of her wardrobe, she concluded that everything was in the right place - hair tied back in a long, blond ponytail; garishly pink runners with frilly white ankle-socks. Business as usual. It was silly, but sometimes she half-expected to see Kim's clunky old Doc Martins adorning her tiny feet. Kitty understood that that would be impossible, but being a child, logic wasn't her strong point.

Glancing around the grove, she started down the bicycle path (woodchip trail in Kim's world), heading for the playground. She had arranged to meet her friends around twelve thirty, and it was getting on to midday already. It would take around fifteen minutes to make her way through the grove, which was somewhat larger than the pine glade on Kim's side. With any luck, J & S would be waiting for her at the swings, same as most mornings.

In Kim's world, Janet and Suzie were just a couple of girls who lived five blocks down the road, but over here, they were Kitty's best friends. She'd known them since the first grade, back when they used to play hopscotch every day after school. Kitty guessed they were getting a little too old for Barbie dolls and jump-rope these days, but they still hung out together, watching TV and gorging on chocolate cookies like there was no tomorrow. Not that the future was a big concern for any of them. The best summer of their lives was spread out before them - and when you're a child, the summer never seems to end.

3.

Emerging from the Cypress Grove, Kitty walked over to water fountain, scanning the

playground as she bent over to take a drink. The field was empty except for a small group of boys playing catch on the other side of the oval. That was nothing out of the ordinary; Coronation Park was usually deserted this time of day. Most of the kids she knew lived over on the Westside. Kitty decided to test out the swings while she waited for her friends. It was only quarter past twelve; they'd probably still be finishing lunch.

Kitty rode the swing for several minutes, leaning back and pointing her toes towards the clouds. A light wind whipped up her thighs, inflating her skirt and revealing her underpants. Smiling with pleasure, she kicked her feet in mid-air, enjoying the touch of the air on her skin. Like most girls her age, she loved riding the breeze in the early afternoon; it left her feeling cool and tingly all over.

"Kitty!" someone called, "hey, Kitty!"

She looked around to see Janet and Suzie approaching through the oval. Raising her hand in casual greeting, she waved a reply over her shoulder. The girls wandered towards the swings, chattering with the easy banter of childhood. All three swung in unison, as if sensing some universal rhythm, their ponytails streaming carelessly out behind them.

The afternoon passed in a patter of girlish conversation as they swung happily through the sky. Kitty's frock billowed up over her waist several times. She kicked her long legs every time her skirt rose, pretending she was a cancan girl. That was one of her favourite bedroom games; she often danced before her mirror with her skirt up to her chin. The very thought of showing off her panties in public made her heart race with excitement. Sometimes she wore her pink satin panties, the ones with the lacy frills around the derriere. She felt so breathtakingly naughty when she bent over and threw her skirt over her head, revealing her pantied bottom to the mirror.

"Wanna go play on the jungle gym?" Suzie asked no one in particular. They'd been on the swings for a good thirty minutes by now.

"Okay," Janet said, and hopped off the swing. Kitty followed a moment later, dropping catlike to her feet. The three walked over to the monkey bars, chortling happily away amongst themselves. Suzie reached the gym first, swinging to the top with a kind of unconscious grace. Kitty followed her friends along the bars, clambering hand-over-hand in quick bursts. Her heart was thudding in her throat. This was the part she enjoyed the most.

Reaching the center of the grid, Kitty hooked her knees over the bars and slung herself upside down. Her dress immediately flipped inside out, exposing her undies all the way to her belly button. She felt a blush rise to her features: everything was on display now. It was embarrassing, but it was also kind of nice, too – that tingly feeling was spreading though her entire body now. Flicking her tongue over her lips, she glanced down (or rather up) to see what she had on.

Her panties were white nylon briefs with a little bow on the front. Most of Kitty's underpants were either pink or white (the only colors her Mommy bothered to buy, for some reason). Kitty absolutely loved showing them off. As far as she was concerned, it was a crime to hide something so pretty. The frock slid slowly down her torso, revealing several inches of smooth tummy and a hint of cotton singlet. The skirt hung limply over her face, blocking her view of the playground. She had to push it aside with one hand to see what was going on.

Suzie D'Antonio was sitting on top of the bars, idly studying her friend's underwear. There was nothing illicit in her gaze, just childish curiosity. She'd known Kitty for over four years and must have seen her panties like a zillion times. Anyway, there wasn't much else to look at, all she could see were a pair of splayed thighs and silky white gusset. Everything else was hidden behind a fall of yellow cotton. Overhead, the clouds wheeled across a perfect sky. The conversation drifted onto the usual topics - mermaids, unicorns, boys and teachers. Kitty rocked gently back and forth beneath the scaffold, her frock inching steadily toward the ground.

Janet was also hanging by the knees, although she wasn't revealing anything. The

quintessential tomboy, Janet Connor never wore anything except shorts and jeans. Like Suzie, she was used to seeing Kitty's underpants every time they hit the playground (or anywhere else, for that matter). Young as she was, Janet understood that her playmate loved doing "girly" things. It was just another side of her personality, no different from her preference for ultra-cutsie plush toys. As a matter of fact, Kitty Taylor must have been about the "girliest" little girl she'd ever met.

As for Kitty herself, she would have hung upside down all afternoon if she could have. Having her panties on exhibit always made her head spin with delight. It was something that Kim could never do back in his plane of existence, so she always seized the opportunity whenever it arose - making up for lost time, so to speak. She loved that sense of impish pleasure that accompanied the act of baring. There was something else too, a kind of breathless arousal, but she was still too young to put a name to that.

At some point, Suzie lost all interest in Kitty's underwear and swung down between her friends, reaching out to take their hands in her own. Janet hummed a tune from a popular soft drink commercial and the other two joined in without even thinking. Gravity had its way with Kitty's dress until it was all but falling off her shoulders.

And holding hands beneath the wide, clear sky, they rocked their way through the early afternoon.

4.

The wind continued to pick up as the day wore on, shaking leaves from the trees and driving swarms of cicadas through the Cypress grove. The girls descended from the bars and chased each other around the cenotaph until they fell to the grass in a jumbled heap, breathless and gasping and giggling with delight. Once they'd caught their breath, they climbed up into the Indian Fort to play a few rounds of Rock-Kisses-Paper, which was how they normally concluded their day. Rock-Kisses-Paper was their special version of the classic schoolyard hand-game, in which the loser had to kiss the winners on the lips. It was a very secret thing, this soft pressing of the lips, something they had sworn to keep between themselves. It had been Kitty's suggestion, made some months before when she first started Crossing Over. Much to her surprise, the others had agreed without comment, as if kissing their best friend was the most natural thing in the world.

Which, of course, it was.

The afternoon finally wound down around 4.00, when the shadows began lengthening to a noticeable degree. Alerted by some mysterious telepathy unknown to modern science, all three slid down out of the Fort and walked over to the water fountain (half an hour of non-stop kissy-kissy being thirsty work and all). This was their last pit stop before heading their separate ways, Kitty via the Cypress Grove, J & S through the oval. It had been a fine, cool day, but they were all ready to head home for a nice, warm dose of mother-love. Somewhere beyond the trees, households were clicking into evening mode. Baths being run in anticipation of the evening's girl-washing festivities.

"See you tomorrow?" Suzie asked, her hair tousled by the rising gale. Janet stood close behind her, carefully straightening out her rumpled t-shirt. Her mom would probably have a heart attack when she got home, same as every night.

"Yeah, okay," Kitty replied, unconsciously fussing with her own clothing, "over by the swings again?" The girls nodded their agreement, Janet readjusting her hair-band in the background.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Okay, bye"

They stepped in to exchange brief girly kisses (on the cheek this time), warm and sweet as the

taste of rock-candy. Kitty felt a light hand patting her bottom. Probably Janet - Jan Connor was an incorrigible bottom-patter, always had been. Not that Kitty minded in the least, there was something rather endearing about the gesture. They said goodbye one last time, touching fingers as they turned away, and the afternoon was over.

Kitty returned to her quiet spot beneath the trees, preparing herself for the return trip. The Cypress Grove was a Pine Glade back on Kim's side of reality, one of a number of subtle differences between their two worlds. The surrounding countryside was pretty much the same – low foothills leading up to steeply sloping mountainsides. The layout of the city was virtually identical, but street names and other things were slightly off-kilter. Coronation Avenue was called Memorial Drive in Kim's world; Eastland Plaza was known as Dawnside Mall. These were all minor variations, barely discernible to the casual observer. The most significant difference, so far as Kitty could see, was that she was a boy over there.

And in some respects, that made all the difference.

Closing her eyes (unlike Kim, she didn't like to watch the world melt and shift around her), Kitty uttered her codeword and Crossed Over. The moment of transfer spun out to eternity; the ground seemed to vanish beneath her feet. Plunging through the quantum fabric of the universe, Kitty felt her clothes whipped from her figure, her body dissolving and reforming at precisely the same instant. Stars glittered beneath her eyelids, blazing like miniature supernovas -

And Kim Taylor opened his eyes.

He was back in his world, still bearing the residue of his other self. That lush tingling sensation was coursing through his nervous system, making his heart race like a trip hammer. He glanced down at himself, making sure he wasn't wearing a dress, then glanced around the Glade, listening for approaching footsteps. Had anyone seen him arrive? No, it was nearly four thirty, and the woodchip trail was deserted. He had to get home now. His Mom would be heating up the oven, wondering where he was this late in the afternoon.

Checking his watch, Kim headed up towards Memorial Drive. In some other universe, Kitty Tyler was walking along a disused bicycle path, treading precisely the same steps as himself. Somehow, they always managed to fall into sync whenever he decided to Step Over. They would probably remain in tune until he reached his front door. It was a paradox, impossible to explain, but that was how it appeared to work.

"Is that you, Kim?" his mother called out from the kitchen as he let himself in through the front door.

"Yes, Mom," he replied, kicking off his runners. The rich aroma of chicken casserole wafted down the hallway. Kim ran his tongue over his teeth, realizing for the first time how hungry he was.

"OK. Upstairs and wash up. Dinner's in ten minutes."

"Yes, Mom," he repeated, and trotted obediently up to the bathroom. Most of their conversations followed this minimalist pattern. No sentiment, no tenderness, no maudlin terms of endearment. His mother wasn't as openly affectionate as Kitty's. Women tend to treat boys differently to girls. Well, no big deal; the woman cooked a killer Sunday roast, which was how she usually demonstrated her love for him.

Leaning over the sink, Kim scrubbed his face and arms, watching himself closely in the mirror. He could almost see his twin standing on the other side, lathering up her tiny hands with liquid soap. They were still in sync, even now. Probably would be for the rest of the evening. Of course, superficial variations were inevitable. Kitty lived in an all-female household; her vanity was covered with bath oils, deodorants and exotic perfumes. Kim's marble-top was devoid of

cosmetics, his mother kept everything in the medicine cabinet (particularly since she'd caught him experimenting with her lipstick).

Drying his face with a soft blue towel, Kim bid a silent farewell to his reflection and strode out into the hallway. Kitty walked with him, he could hear her thoughts echoing through the passages of his mind, like a voice murmuring through a paper wall. That wasn't too surprising; they were the same person after all. Always had been, although he'd never realized it until last year. Seemed like forever ago now, but when you're a kid, a year can last a lifetime.

He headed for stairs, thinking of the afternoon he (she) had spent at the park: the sun, the grass, the cool, gentle breeze. The gasping delight she'd felt, hanging upside down with her dress over her head. A heady mixture of pleasure and humiliation, it usually occurred when he imagined he was a girl - something which had baffled him for years but made perfect sense since he'd discovered Kitty's existence. Small wonder he fantasized about being a girl.

In another reality, he *was*.

Looking out through an upstairs window, he saw that a blue twilight had fallen across Chamberlain. Streetlights flickered on one by one as he watched, sweeping past his house towards the west end of town. Kim had always thought it signaled the end of day (which, indeed, it does when you're nine years old). He descended the stairs with his hand on the rail, smiling gently to himself. There was a great deal of magic in his life. More, perhaps, than any child honestly deserved. He often wondered if there was anyone else like him, if he was the only boy capable of spanning the boundaries between two separate worlds. He supposed there had to be others, but some obscure sense of intuition told him that he was unique. Rare, exceptional, one in a million. The only one who turned into a girl when he transferred.

"Dinner's ready," Mom called from the living room. They usually ate in front of the TV, same as any normal American family. Kim picked up his feet and scampered down the hallway, practically watering at the mouth. Strangely enough, he was always ravenously hungry after spending a day on the Other Side. Hungry, tired and thoroughly satisfied.

"Well, did you have a good time down at the park?" Lynne asked as Kim launched himself into a chair.

"Yeah," he replied, reaching for his plate, "we played on the swings and the bars and everything."

"We?"

"S & J and I."

"Oh, yes; S and J," Mom nodded sagely, "your new friends. So, what else did you do?"

Lynne Taylor listened in mild amusement while her son regaled her with stories of the day's adventures, grateful that he was finally making friends. She knew he was something of a schoolyard pariah, that his classmates regarded him as an unwanted and rather unsavoury stranger. Originally, she'd dismissed it as the result of a naturally timid personality, but recently, she'd begun to fear that Kim was socially maladjusted (the latest sound-bite bandied about by new-age therapists these days). The revelation that he was forming normal relationships came as something of a relief. And if it seemed a little odd that a nine-year old boy was hanging out with a couple of girls, Lynne didn't mind in the least.

For reasons she couldn't quite explain, it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

TELL ME TRUE

Kristy Leigh

PART ONE: DOORWAYS

I.

KC was five when his family moved into the house on Carrington Drive. He was very big on secret agents and hidden passages at the time and was thoroughly intrigued when he discovered a door which went nowhere. This was utterly outside of his experiences with doors up to that time: a door, by its very nature, had to lead somewhere. You walked through one to get from *outside* to *inside*, a doorway took you out of one room and into another. You knocked on them to get them to open, had to flick the latch to let people come in. Most of their handles were too high for KC to reach, but this one had its knob set down low, just the right height, as if it had been built for KC and KC alone.

He came across it on the afternoon they shifted in. KC had been helping his Mom and Dad carry stuff into the kitchen (well, they'd been doing most of the actual carrying, KC had been more sort of supervising and making helpful remarks, like *'Why are there mushrooms growing in that cupboard?'*) when he noticed there was another room at the back of the kitchen, some hitherto unobserved space that KC just *had* to inspect.

He wandered through the canyons of boxes that were springing up on the lino, and made his way into the back room, pausing in the middle to stare around. He couldn't remember ever having been in a room this big before. The ceiling seemed about three miles high. The floor was a vast expanse roughly the size of a playground. How were they ever going to fill it up? There weren't enough cardboard boxes in the world to do *that*.

Then he noticed the door.

It was tall, taller even than KC's Dad (who was the tallest man in the world, KC was sure), but it still looked rather tiny sitting there in the middle of that monstrously huge blank wall. It looked thick and heavy, like the door at the front of the house. It must have been a very important door, it was made of very dark, oily wood. KC was utterly delighted with this find; his new home had all sorts of surprises. *Hundreds* of rooms to explore, as well as cupboards and fireplaces and wardrobes and all sorts of little nooks and crannies a boy could squeeze into when he wanted to hide from his older brother. Maybe this place just went on and on! Wouldn't that be just *so cool!!*

His old home had been nothing like this. KC had climbed over every inch of the house back at Ashville, and there had been absolutely nothing exciting about it (at least, not lately). Even Mom's wardrobe had finally lost its fascination, and *that*, at one time, had been the scariest thing in existence (KC's brother had assured him that at least twenty ghosts lived in Mom's creepy old wardrobe. He then proceeded to lock KC in that dark, confined hole for nearly thirty minutes until Mom and Dad came home and heard him screaming hard enough to split a lung).

KC walked over and studied the door with the sort of expertise normally reserved for a professional. Not only was the knob set at a perfect height, it was even the right size for his little fist. It gleamed in the lusty haze of the early afternoon, and KC decided it must be made of gold. The thought suddenly occurred to him that it might be locked. It had a big, black keyhole (odd for an inside door) just beneath the knob. What if it was locked, and they'd lost the key?

KC felt a sudden, jagged stab of panic. There had to be at least a zillion rooms hidden behind that door just begging KC to go exploring, and no one had a key to open it with! It was locked

forever!! He'd *never* get to see what was on the other side now. He'd grow *old* and *die* without ever getting to set foot past the mystery doorway. No, that couldn't be right, this was *his* door, he'd discovered it before anyone else in the universe. KC clenched his fist with the iron-tight grip of utter hysteria and turned with all his might.

The door opened, swinging outwards with no resistance whatsoever.

KC almost collapsed with disappointment.

The door didn't go anywhere.

2.

The door opened onto a brick wall.

It was brown and dull and streamered with cobwebs.

KC called out to his father in dismay.

Dad sauntered out of the kitchen, house-dust peppering his balding head. He had grime on his thick, blunt fingers and a screwdriver in his shirt pocket. Graham, KC's older brother, swaggered along behind, sneering in abject contempt at the sound of KC's voice.

"What's up, Doc?" Dad asked, grinning. But KC wasn't going to be cheered up so easily. This must have been the biggest let down he'd ever known. Worse than that, he knew he was going to have to live with it, somehow.

KC pointed at the doorway.

"Dad - this *door*. It doesn't *go* anywhere."

Graham curled his upper lip, staring down at the younger boy.

"So *what?*" he demanded, eyes flaming like lanterns fueled by hate.

So fucking WHAT, you STUPID little SHIT??!

Graham was fourteen and considered himself to be some kind of god. He wore a black leather jacket and tight blue levis, which was evidently what all the gods were into that year.

Dad ignored his divine offspring and inspected the door to nowhere.

"Some of these old places are funny like that, KC," Dad said, rattling the knob experimentally, "bordered up fire places, bricked in windows, that sort of thing. *You* know."

KC nodded to affirm he knew precisely what his father was talking about, although in actual fact, he hadn't the proverbial faintest. Several seconds later, he decided that betraying his ignorance was preferable to sending the next six years wondering.

"Why doesn't it go anywhere?" he asked.

Graham shook his head in snide, knowing arrogance: *Only a fucking IDIOT wouldn't know that.*

"Probably did once," Dad explained, waving the door back and forth, as if this would confirm his theory, "might have been another room out there at some point - a laundry, preservatives room, something or other. Maybe an extra bedroom. Who knows?" He looked down at KC and smiled.

"What happened to it?" the boy asked.

"Torn down, I guess. This place is pretty old, Kace."

"How old?"

"How old do you reckon?"

"About a thousand years!"

Dad laughed, ruffling his son's hair, and made his way back in to the kitchen, chuckling to himself. Graham glared down at KC for two seconds, then strutted out of the room, a fourteen year old deity with a Marlon Brando jacket and the coolest moves in the space-time continuum.

KC stared after them, then looked back in at the doorway. Hardly enough room for a mouse to

fit in between the door and the brickwork. He closed it quietly, and went off to supervise the installation of the sofa in the living room.

3.

Despite his disappointment, the Door to Nowhere continued to snare KC's attention. Once the excitement of The Big Move had died down, he spent most of his mornings playing out in the back room, eyes constantly circling around to the door and its shiny gold knob. It was a mystery. Sure, Dad had explained it all to him; old houses were built strange. But that hadn't really explained anything. The door didn't lead anywhere now, but it *had* led somewhere at some time.

And *not* to some boring old place like a laundry.

His Mom had been reading him a book back in Ashville called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It was a story about some little kids who go through a creaky old wardrobe and find a whole new world called Narnia. It was always snowing in Narnia ('always winter but never christmas') and there were all sorts of magical animals and fairy-story people: lions and tigers and giants and witches and goblins and a whole mess of other things with names KC could never remember. He just *bet* the door had led to some secret place like Narnia once.

The days drifted by, growing shorter and colder as the year turned to autumn. Rising early in the mornings, KC could never resist the temptation to get up and peek behind the Door to Nowhere. Of course, there was never anything back there except the brown brick wall. But sometimes, he was absolutely certain there *was* something else in there, and KC was just about *busting* to know what it was.

4.

KC dreaded the evenings his parents went out. Terrible things happened when he was left alone with his brother. Usually it was just ordinary sibling teasing, like ice cubes down the back of his shirt, or putting vinegar in his cordial and making him drink it. KC could usually put up with dumb jokes and the odd clip around the back of the head. But sometimes the teasing turned nasty - vicious on occasion. Times like that, Graham's incessant harrassment crept inexorably across the line dividing ordinary teasing from psychological abuse.

The torment invariably involved KC's worst fears - darkness, ghosts, suffocation. KC was an asthmatic, and had come close to asphyxiation on several occasions. One time Graham had filled the bath half-full of freezing cold water and held KC's head under until his breath had given out and he was sure he was going to drown. Mom and Dad had been down at the pokies that night, which meant that Graham had been granted carte blanche to torture KC for close to an hour.

It seemed to have gone on forever, KC wet and shivering and pleading for mercy, Graham holding him by the back of the neck and digging his fingers into the boy's soft flesh. He'd been utterly merciless, even after KC's chest had seized up and he'd started begging pathetically for his medication. The drowning game had continued until KC was so exhausted he could no longer even struggle. Graham lost all interest at that point and dumped him on the bathroom floor; a limp, dripping, trembling heap, lacking even the strength to cry out loud.

The drowning game had been pretty bad, but Graham's mind had come up with far more ingenious tortures, which was why KC tended to play outside whenever he and Graham were home alone. At least outside, you could run away. Inside, particularly at night, there was no escape.

The worst had been the *spiders*.

KC had always been terrified of spiders, particularly the big, black hairy variety. Graham had

discovered an empty closet in the hallway that was absolutely *teeming* with spiders. Huge, dark, bloated things with bright red spots on their swollen bodies. They sat by the thousands in that nightmare cubicle, nesting balefully in their webs. One evening Graham had dragged KC to the brink, warning him in a harsh, gravel whisper that one day, he was going to lock him in there with all those black, scuttling horrors.

I'm gonna shove you in there and nail the door shut, and you'll be trapped in there with all those SPIDERS crawling all over your face and in your hair and every time you open your mouth to scream they'll climb right in and down your throat and into your stomach, biting and stinging and EATING YOU ALIVE until there's nothing left but a quivering mass of hairy black SPIDERS, inside and out!!!

KC had tried to warn his parents what Graham was planning to do to him, but they just laughed and patted him reassuringly on the head: *Don't be silly, Gray's just trying to scare you. He'd never do a thing like that. No, never. Go on, he's just teasing.*

But KC hadn't been convinced. He wasn't an idiot, he knew precisely what Graham was capable of doing, and this was the sort of wanton, senseless cruelty that good ole Gray-boy regularly perpetrated in the name of good, clean fun. KC knew when it was most likely to happen; some long, cold, endless evening when Mom and Dad were out and there was no one around to stop Graham doing whatever he *fucking well pleased*. It mightn't happen the first time, but it was going to happen.

KC could only wait and pray to God that his parents stayed home for the rest of his life.

5.

Happily, Graham tended to be absent most nights, once they'd settled into their new residence. He trained with the local rugby team three times a week and quickly made friends with the pubescent sociopaths hanging out at the Southmead Penny Arcade.

Some weekends he brought them over to watch football on the TV. KC hated football; who in their right minds would prefer to watch a bunch of ugly men running around beating each other up when there were *Marvel Super Heroes* doing the same thing on the other channel?!

There was always a lot of yelling and hollering and horsing around whenever Graham's friends turned up. They spent most of the afternoon sitting around telling the filthiest jokes imaginable - the sort that would have gotten KC yelled at if he'd ever tried to tell one - but Dad loved the atmosphere and would often laugh until all four of his chins were quivering in unison.

Still, it wasn't too bad the rest of the week. With Graham out of the house, KC could get back to the most serious business of life: settling down on the sofa between his parents to watch television.

KC was a big fan of TV. He was just old enough to recall the first run of *Star Trek* and *The Wild, Wild West*, both of which instilled in him a love for fantasy and the unusual which lasted out his childhood. *Danger Man* (and later on, *The Prisoner*) had given him his fascination for secret doors. Richard Greene fought his incessant battle against the evil sheriff of Nottingham (*'Robin Hood, Robin Hood, riding through the glen; Robin Hood, Robin Hood, with his bandit men ...'*), while Leif Erikson and *The Vikings* harried the British shorelines daily, carrying off innocent young maidens to unknown fates in foreign lands.

He'd tuned in night after night (*same bat-time, same bat-channel*) to the adventures of the dynamic duo, sometimes knotting a towel around his neck and bounding about the room hurling imaginary batarangs at invisible villains (*'Holy Bat-Traps, Batman!!!'*)

However, the shows he liked best were the British comedies. There was *Please Sir*, *The Rag Trade* and *Doctor in the House*; each of which featured humor KC barely understood, as well as

On the Buses, Me Mammy and The Two Ronnies ('The Two Ninnies', Mom used to call them - quite seriously, as if that was the program's real title). The undisputed king of them all was *The Benny Hill Show*, which played every Thursday night at eight-thirty. KC would beg his parents' permission to stay up that one more crucial hour, then patiently endure being teased almost beyond human endurance. They always gave in at the end, indulging his wishes with the kind of parental largess that provokes parricide in later life.

Watching Benny's shows, KC and his folks laughed themselves silly, and unlike the other comedies, KC knew what he was laughing at most of the time. *Benny Hill's* humor was easy to understand, particularly the sketches where no one said anything. Those parts were about the funniest things that had ever happened in the history of the universe; especially the chase scenes at the end, where about fifty people went running after Benny shaking their fists in the air.

This particular episode, something happened, something KC hadn't been expecting. It wasn't exactly funny; at least not in the way it was funny seeing someone get hit on the head or sit on a red hot iron poker, but it was surprising and funny in a different sort of way. It was something that made his Dad snicker and his mother shake her head in disapproval, so KC knew it was something he shouldn't ask questions about. If he had, however, the question would have been *why is that girl taking off all her clothes?*

6.

Of course, she hadn't taken off *all* her clothes, just her dress and slip, but that was something KC had never seen before. Not even his Mom. Of course, there had been the other children at the play group back in Ashville, but that was different. Little kids ran around half naked all the time, everybody knew that. The girl on *The Benny Hill Show* had been grown up - well, *mostly* grown up, anyway.

Later on that night, after he'd gone to bed, he lay thinking about the way the girl had smiled while she stripped down to her underwear. It had been a secret, *naughty* kind of smile, as if showing off her panties like that was fun.

KC lay in the dark, replaying the scene over and over in his mind.

Remembering made *him* smile too.

7.

Most mornings he lay in bed until the cartoons came on at seven, but on this occasion, he decided to get up an hour earlier, before the rest of the family started their yawning preparations for the day. An idea had occurred to him as soon as he'd woken up, thinking about the girl's coy, naughty striptease the night before.

He tiptoed out to the hallway and pulled open the linen cupboard. Mom always put her old remnants in there, bits and pieces that she sometimes repaired on her Singer Sewing Machine (that was how she said it: with capitals, as if she were announcing a knighthood). It was one of her hobbies, making children's clothes. She gave most of her experiments to friends or to welfare shops. KC foraged around in the remnants bag, smiling the *Benny Hill* girl's smile to himself, until he found the things he was looking for.

Bundling these items in his arms, he walked through to the kitchen, glancing over his shoulder to make certain no one had risen early to catch him out. It was extremely important that nobody - especially Graham - saw what he was about to do. He couldn't have said why, as he was too young to really understand the way adults think, but somehow, he simply knew it was something he *had* to keep hidden. From everybody.

He stepped into the back room, closing the double doors quietly behind him. He glanced automatically at the Door to Nowhere, then dismissed it from his thoughts almost immediately. He had something else on his mind for the moment. He walked over to the middle of the floor and laid out the remnants he'd borrowed from his mother's sewing bag. Not remnants, really. More like second-hand clothes she'd repaired good as new.

Girl's clothes.

The girl's smile touched his lips again.

PART TWO: THE GIRL

8.

The girl in the red mini has strawberry blond hair and long, tapering legs. Stepping into the dressing room, she puts down her shoulder bag on the make-up table and hitches up her hemline, revealing a seemingly endless length of smooth, stockinged thigh. She poses in the window, completely oblivious of the council workers across the road. Benny and his friends suddenly pause in their labours, faces mesmerized by the prospect of seeing a pretty young girl adjusting her nylons before their very eyes.

The girl unclips her suspenders one teasing strap at a time, then slipping off her shoes, peels down her stockings and hangs them carefully over the chair. Across the road, the accidents have started to happen. Preoccupied with the girl in the window, one of the ditch diggers unwittingly hurls a spade full of dirt over an elderly lady with a shopping stroller. Outraged beyond words, she shakes her fist at the workman and moves along in high dudgeon. Benny brings his sledgehammer down on an old man's foot, who instantly leaps into a frenzied one-legged dance, hopping frantically about until he falls into the ditch. Benny immediately tries to help the aged gentleman up and is rewarded with a sharp clout on the head from the old man's walking stick.

The girl in the window straightens up and reaches around to unzip the back of her dress. She slips the straps off her shoulders, smiling a wide, naughty smile, and steps out of the little red dress in a single lithe movement. She hangs the dress up on the clothing rail and stands revealed in a shiny white bra and half-slip. The slip is gauzy satin, so tiny that it barely covers the edges of her underpants. She walks about the dressing room on bare feet, swaying her hips and showing off her beautifully slender legs.

Across the road, the council gang has lapsed into utter chaos; the old man has climbed out and is chasing Benny around the ditch with his walking stick. Several more pedestrians join in the fracas; a bruiser with his cap pulled low over his face, an immaculately attired civil servant with an umbrella, a bald-headed priest attempting to restore order. An officious-looking police officerrushes into sight and begins taking down names.

Still completely unaware of the major conflict going on outside, the girl leans over the table and begins making up in the mirror. Neon-red lipstick, followed by a little powder. Picking up a brush, she flounces across the room, inspecting the items on the clothing rail, then turns to brush her hair in the mirror. Her bra and slip are glaringly bright against her deeply tanned flesh, her waiste so thin that a man could almost fit his palm around it. She circles back to the table, puts down the brush, then returns to the middle of the room. The commotion in the street outside reaches a crescendo.

By now, a dozen passerbys have joined in the general anarchy, waging war on the bumbling council workers. Benny is under siege from the old geezer with the walking stick on one side and the police constable on the other. The bobby starts clocking Benny on the crown with his day stick, alternating blows with the old man. Almost unnoticed by the rest of the crowd, a press team

arrives with note-pads and cameras ready to document the riot.

The girl inspects the lace trimmings on her satin slip, fiddling out a microscopic piece of lint, then places her hands on her hips, admiring her figure in the mirror. She smiles that brilliant, naughty-little-girl smile one more time, and takes off the slip, letting it slide to the carpet in a soft white pool. She stands exposed in the window, modelling her underwear for the entire street. Her panties shimmer like platinum in the afternoon light as she delicately unhooks her frilly white suspender belt and places it over the chair with her stockings.

The melee across the road comes to an abrupt halt. Benny and his foes pause in mid-blow, stunned into complete immobility by the vision framed in the window. The PC puts his truncheon away and cocks his cap back on his forehead. The civil servant produces a pair of opera glasses, the old geezer with the walking stick takes out his glasses and steps forward for a better view. The press photographer begins reeling off snapshots.

The object of their undivided attention parades over to the clothing rail, sorting through the skirts, blouses and dresses hanging up there. Nothing seems quite right today; she pulls out a frock and looks it over carefully before replacing it with a dissatisfied pout. Deciding to start at the top, she takes a large box down from the shelf above the clothes rail. She puts on a wide, canary-yellow hat and shimmies around the room, watching herself in the mirror. She weaves back and forth in her lingerie several times, still smiling her naughty little smile. Then, making a final half turn before the mirror, she looks straight out the window for the first time. Her eyes widen as she sees the tableaux outside: twenty slack jawed, motionless men - including her parish priest - looking in, their faces bulging with fascination.

Suddenly realizing that half the town is seeing her in nothing but her bra and panties, she gasps, covers her cleavage with her hands, and runs giggling over to hide beside the window. Peeking outside to see who actually saw her undressed, she modestly holds the curtain across her body.

With the girl out of sight, the battle resumes. Jaws are busted, noses pulled, lips fattened. The bald headed priest tumbles into the ditch, still holding his bible aloft. In the background, all but lost in the general confusion, Benny is led away in an armlock by the PC . . .

9.

The clothes KC had taken from the linen cupboard weren't exactly the same as the girl on *Benny Hill* had been wearing, but an exact imitation was unnecessary; KC's imagination required only a close approximation. There were a pair of frilly white underpants which fortuitously happen to fit him exactly, and a small, creamy colored crop top which - for KC - would double for a bra (KC didn't know what a brassiere was for, but it was unquestionably a necessary part of the costume). There had been no white satin half-slip in the sewing bag, but he'd managed to find a bright pink cotton skirt with an elasticized waist. It was light and breezy, almost translucent, and KC judged it would feel cool and smooth against his flesh.

No stockings in his size, but there was a pair of longish girls' socks, which, to KC's inexperienced mind, was pretty much one and the same. The last piece of apparel had been the treat of the morning. Holding it up, KC wasn't quite certain what it was. A woman's blouse or top or something, but it was bright and red and stretchy; it would look just like the mini the *Benny Hill* girl had been wearing. There was even a zip at the back. KC smiled, his eyes wide with innocent, childish pleasure, and began to take off his PJs.

10.

Something happened while KC changed.

He didn't just put on girl's clothing, he seemed to put on a girl's *body*. No, not quite. His body felt *different*, there was no question of that, but he seemed to have pulled on a great deal more than a girl's shape. He ... *felt* like a girl. Or at least, what he imagined a girl would feel like, if she was sweet, and saucy, and pretty - and very, *very* naughty. He could not, at his age, have put it into words, but it was as if he had somehow slipped into a new *identity*.

He had become the girl. The one from last night.

The one who'd taken off her clothes.

No, that wasn't right either. He wasn't *that* girl. KC could see her very clearly in his mind. He had taken a snapshot of her with his eyes and developed the picture in his imagination. It was like a high-resolution moving photograph; he could visualize the finest details, the texture of her skin, the lacquer on her fingernails, the deep redness of her lips, the sweep of her hair over her forehead. But the photo wasn't just in his imagination. It was as if that picture had somehow been superimposed onto his body.

KC hadn't become *a* girl.

She had become *The Girl*.

11.

She played out the scene several times, recreating the scene from memory: the dressing room with its racks of feminine accoutrements, the makeup table with its cosmetics and brushes, the tall, wide window looking out onto the street, the vaguely lecherous council workers leaning on their picks and shovels - she moved through a complex, constructed mind-space, shedding her clothing and parading before a non-existent audience.

The ecstasy swept over her, simmering in her body like a ball of liquid heat, leaving her trembling with excitement and a new emotion she couldn't name. Something had blossomed within her, something huge and pure and utterly beyond description. It was a breathless, gasping delight without comparison, something which she would seek for the remainder of her life. And although this sensual, unspeakable fire would remain forever beyond her reach, there were a few rare moments when she would come *extremely* close ...

12.

She assumed her feminine role most mornings, creating little 'scripts' from imagination or else basing her performances on TV programs. It was the beginning of the seventies, an era of extreme political incorrectness and risqué humor, when sexual innuendo insinuated itself into the least sexual of domestic comedies. Television provided KC with an apparently inexhaustible source of inspiration for her fantasy-play.

At first it was enough just to become The Girl and act out her scenarios subjectively, but after a while she became curious to see what she *looked* like while she performed. Being looked *at* was an important part of being The Girl. Whenever the girls on *Doctor in the House* or in the *Carry On* movies undressed, they were always visible in some way, even if they didn't realize they were being observed.

Sometimes they were seen by other people in the show (like the council workers in the *Benny Hill* sketch); if not, then the camera was watching - which meant, of course, that the audience was seeing them. Being The Girl meant being seen by someone. KC couldn't let anyone see her dressed as The Girl, but at least she could watch herself.

KC had taken to hiding her props in an old suitcase under her bed. She rose at five one

morning and dressed as The Girl, then examined herself closely in the dressing table mirror. She'd never performed in her bedroom before - there wasn't nearly enough space - but this morning she made an exception.

She stripped gradually down to her undies, smiling widely as each successive layer came off. First her slippers, then her blouse, followed by skirt and singlet - the latter standing in for a full slip. Removing the slip was always the best part, the last thing to come off before her panties were displayed to the world. She felt *thoroughly* undressed, even though she was still wearing her bra and pants. Inexplicably, *undressed* did not equal *naked*; as long as she was wearing lingerie, she was still The Girl. Naked, she would have been nothing more than a nude little boy.

She didn't look much like the girls on television (they were all grown up, for one thing) but she was pleased by what she saw. Her striptease revealed a pretty little girl with short, curly brown hair and a roundish face, her body slightly pudgy with baby fat. If her hair had been slightly longer, she might have passed for any five year-old girl, no different from the ones she used to play with back in Ashville. Of course, the girls at playgroup didn't wear bras.

KC had become aware of the differences in shape between big girls and little girls by comparing the kids at kindy to the women she saw on TV. One evening, she'd asked her Mom what 'those white strap-things' ladies wear on their chests were.

"It's called a *bra*, dear," Mom replied offhand, as if a brassiere was no big deal, and not in any way connected with lewdness or sex.

"What are they for?" KC asked. Dad pointedly studied the television, trying to hide a smirk.

"Girls use them to hold their breasts in place," Mom said, and shot a warning glance at her husband.

"Oh," KC mused, not really understanding, then wondered aloud: "would my chest look like that if I wore one of those bra-things?"

His parents had glanced at each other and burst out laughing. Once she'd caught her breath, Mom had tried to explain why boys never need to wear brassieres, but the answer had been considerably more confusing than the question. Most of all, KC couldn't understand why girls seemed so different to women. Well, it didn't really matter. KC wasn't trying to look like a *little* girl, anyway. She wanted to look like *The Girl* (over a decade later, KC would note that many 'real' girls wanted precisely the same thing), tall and leggy and almost-adult.

Strangely, KC rarely saw *The Girl* outside of television or ladies' magazines. She often saw women who looked like *The Girl* when she went shopping with Mom, but *Looking Like* didn't mean *Same As*. It was as if *The Girl* didn't really exist at all, except as a flickering image on an electronic screen.

She'd once asked her mother about this discrepancy between 'reality' and its televised counterpart: *Mom, why do the girls on TV look so different to the ladies down the street?* Once Mom understood what KC had meant by this amazingly sophisticated question, she had tried to explain, in the simplest possible language, that all those ladies who went shopping and took their kids to school and cooked and cleaned and worked in the shopping centers were *real* women who lived *real* lives.

The girls on television were . . . well, they were actors and models who lived out *pretend* lives. They looked very pretty, most probably because of all the make-up and expensive clothing and everything, but television was mostly make-believe, and so the people on TV were all make-believe, too.

KC had come to a vague realization that there were two kinds of women in the world: first, there were 'real' girls - the sort who lived across the road or sold bread in the corner shop at the end of the street - and then there were the make-believe ones who appeared on daytime serials or cop shows or westerns. They were more like princesses in a fairy tale: always laughing, always

falling in love and *always* living Happily Ever After.

KC listened and realized that her mother was describing the Girl, or else something very much like her. The Girl was young and beautiful and perfect; everybody loved her, everyone *desired* her, or else desired to *be* her. And best of all, The Girl could be naughty and get away with it. The Girl could get away with *just about anything*.

13.

A little over a month later, KC grappled with the problem of being male. Boys looked different to girls, especially in one extremely crucial spot. Boys looked *different* to girls, especially in one extremely crucial spot. It was easy to hide this difference when she was wearing a dress or a skirt, but once she'd completed her obligatory striptease, she could see her willy, quite plainly, pressing against the thin fabric of her underpants.

Girls, even older ones, seemed to be perfectly smooth down there. KC was too young to have any real concept of sexual difference - she'd never seen a woman naked - but Dad had once told her that girls were born without a willy. KC hadn't really believed him (how could anybody not have a willy? They'd have nothing to *pee* with!!), but it left her with a mystery nonetheless.

Looking at herself in the mirror, KC pulled tight on the elastic of her panties, trying to hide the small bulge standing out at the junction of her thighs. One time she'd tried tucking it up between her legs, then pulled on a pair of knickers to hold it in place. It had worked for about a minute or so. Her underpants had looked flat and completely faultless. Then something had happened, something she couldn't control. The bulge grew even bigger when she began her disrobing ritual.

KC began to understand that Dad must have been right. She had no idea what 'real' girls had down there, but it sure wasn't anything like she had. She placed a hand over herself, obliterating the offending outline. If only she could make it go away permanently. Dressing as The Girl made her feel wonderful; she would gladly have sacrificed that silly little thing if it meant she could feel this good all the time.

Such a small, unimportant thing, really, but it made all the difference. It made her a boy, and she could honestly say that she hated being a boy. If she could just get rid of it, she'd never have to live as a male again. People would think she was a girl, a real one. She would be one step closer to The Girl. KC wished she'd been born female.

14.

She'd forgotten all about the *spiders*.

15.

Mom and Dad had gone out to the Leagues' club, leaving KC alone with Graham and one of his friends from Lachlan High, a short, scrawny boy named Franky Curtis. Franky was an ugly little bastard who was constantly grinning like a weasel. KC thought he had one of the most unpleasant faces in human existence. Years later, she discovered that quite a number of people agreed with this description. No one seemed to like him, except Graham, and even this assumption was debatable. Mom couldn't stand a bar of 'that Curtis boy' and refused to let him inside the house if he dropped by when Graham was out. Even Dad used to refer to Franky as 'the chinless wonder' behind his back.

KC quickly learned to avoid coming within arm's length of Franky whenever they were in the

same room. That stupid, hyena-faced smile disguised a streak of brainless, gibbering cruelty roughly six miles in length. The chinless wonder scared her much worse than Graham ever had. Franky had this way of looking at her, as if she was an insect that he was about to step on for the sheer, vindictive fun of it. Fortunately, he wasn't too bright, and KC found that if she stayed out of his sight, Franky wouldn't bother her. Most of the time, KC was safe.

Not this night, however. She was drawing in her bedroom when they came to get her.

16.

KC realized almost immediately what they intended to do, and lapsed into tears and pleas as they dragged her out to the hallway. They had opened the spider-cupboard in preparation for the evening's entertainments. It looked to KC like a square, black mouth ready to swallow her alive. She shrieked when she saw it, a wild, keening, despairing noise barely contained by her tiny throat.

Franky's face swiveled down towards her. His eyes were huge and glassy. That enormous, vacant grin was back, more hideous than KC had ever seen it before. He looked barely human, he was more like some lunatic monstrosity from a nightmare. He was giggling to himself, an idiotic, meaningless sound that was halfway between laughter and drooling baby-talk.

KC looked up at her brother.

Graham's face wore the same expression of angry, impatient determination he'd had the night of the drowning game. Graham was a man of grim purpose, and nothing was going to interfere with the execution of his responsibilities. He'd made KC a promise months ago, and he was going to keep it. His eyes were dark and narrowed and completely devoid of mercy: Graham was a REAL MAN, and real men had no time for compassion.

KC's chest clenched up, as if a huge fist was crushing her lungs. She began to gasp for her ventolin. Graham ignored her. Franky continued to slobber out his demented laughter. KC's breath came in wheezing, grating sobs. She struggled against them, setting her feet against the floor, but Graham dealt her a stunning blow to the back of the head. She fell forward, gasping weakly. Franky grabbed a handful of her hair and continued to drag her over to the cupboard. By now, KC was nearly passing out from fright.

They dumped her before the cupboard's gaping doorway. Huddled in abject fear, not even daring to look into the spider-lair, KC wrapped her arms around Graham's legs. Franky's hands descended onto her. She was pulled away and forced to stare in. The spiders were no more than a foot away now. Her face convulsed with absolute terror. They were going to put her in there, shove her in with all those swollen, scampering, biting horrors and slam the door shut, leave her in there to scream and claw and cry all night. She opened her mouth to wail with all her strength. A strangled, choking cough caught in her throat. Nothing else came out. It was the asthma.

Magnified by the lens of hysteria, the spiders looked supernaturally huge, their midnight bodies like shiny, jet-black grapefruit, their thousands of eyes red with fury and hate. They would swarm all over her body, peeling back her flesh and boring into her deepest, most secret parts. There would be no escape, they would fill every crevice inside her, squirming beneath her skin, biting her to death.

Then, impossibly, it became *worse*.

Franky began pulling her clothes off.

They thrust her, naked and weeping and vulnerable, into that crawl space from hell. Graham braced the door with a chair, and they returned to the lounge room to watch Disneyland.

17.

An unknowable length of time later:

- *Cry-baby! Look at the CRY-BABY. Not like a REAL bloke is he?*

- *No. He isn't.*

- *Hey, cry-baby! What are you, a fuckin GIRL or somethin? A real man wouldn't cry like that.*

C'mon, GIRL, showus whatcha got between yer legs -

- *Leave him.*

- *Aw, c'mon Graham -*

- *Mom and Dad'll be home soon. Can't let them see him like this. Get up you little shit. Get dressed.*

KC lay unmoving on the floor. A spider scuttled out from under her elbow and disappeared back into the cupboard. Graham had to kick her several times before she got to her knees and crawled slowly towards her bedroom. Graham was careful not to kick too hard. He didn't want to leave any *obvious* marks.

18.

KC said nothing to her parents about the spider-cupboard. Graham had warned her that if she told anyone - *anyone at all* - he'd kill her. KC never doubted Graham's capacity to follow through on such a threat, but it wasn't the only reason why she kept her ordeal secret. She simply couldn't talk about it - she could hardly *think* about it without wanting to run away and cry. She was incapable of articulating the humiliation and shame the episode had instilled in her.

And whenever she closed her eyes . . .

Cry-baby! Look at the CRY-BABY. Not like a REAL bloke is he?

KC had begun to hate herself.

She couldn't have explained why, but she had come to believe that the whole thing had been her own fault, that she had *deserved* everything that had happened to her. She had done something to get Graham mad at her, something she couldn't quite understand, but it seemed to have been connected to what Franky had said after they pulled her out of the cupboard: *What are you, a fuckin GIRL or somethin? A real man wouldn't cry like that.*

Early morning.

KC stared at her face in the mirror.

Had they known? Had Graham found out what she was doing, dressing up like a girl when everyone else was asleep? Had he told Franky about it, discussed plans to teach her a lesson one night when Mom and Dad were out? Did they lock her in the spider-cupboard as some kind of punishment? Punishment for not being a Real Man?

Was it really so bad?

Wanting to be The Girl?

She took the suitcase from its hiding place beneath the bed, took out its contents, dressed before the mirror. Nothing happened. There was no warmth, no ecstasy, no magic transformation. The Girl was gone. A single, large tear formed in corner of her right eye, overflowed, trickled down her cheek. She - *he* wasn't a girl. He was just a dumb kid in a dress, pretending to be a lady.

They had broken him down, taken everything off him, reduced him to nothing. A real man wouldn't have let them do it; as Franky had said, *Real Men Don't Cry*. He closed his eyes, and for one terrible moment, he could feel the chinless wonder's hands on his skin once again, touching him, turning him over:

C'mon, GIRL, showus whatcha got between yer legs -

KC began to undress. This time, however, he didn't bother to look at himself disrobing.

18.

Life crawls by at a snail's pace for an unhappy child. A minute lasts for hours, a day seems to grow longer with the slow passage of each empty moment, a month stretches intractably into the realms of the infinite. A year might as well be the length of time it would take the winds to erode the Alpine ranges to sea level.

Graham gave KC the grand tour of hell.

They had all the time in the world.

19.

KC's parents noticed the change in their son. Dad commented to his wife that 'Kase' wasn't looking his usual chipper self these days. You sure there's nothing bothering the lad? Hardly know he's in the house, most of the time. Talk about seen but not heard. You're lucky to get more than two words out of him in as many hours.

Mom shrugged her shoulders and put it down to boredom and maybe a little loneliness since they'd left Ashville a few months back. He was missing his little friends at the playgroup. Kids are like that you know. Still, it was good they'd made the move when they did.

Dad lit a cigarette and nodded in agreement. Yeah, he was young, he'd make plenty of new friends once he started school.

Maybe we could look 'round for another kindy in the meantime. I mean to say, we can't have the boy moping around the place with his jaw hanging so low he's just about tripping over it.

- Oh, he'll be alright, Harry. He's just fretting over something or other. He'll cheer up soon enough.

- Guess you're right. I mean, he's only five years old, isn't he?

PART THREE: HOMECOMING

20.

Rising early was a difficult habit to break. KC still got up around five-thirty and played in the back room until the cartoons came on. However, entertaining himself presented something of a problem now. He felt miserable and listless most of the time. Nothing was fun anymore, nothing seemed worth the effort of doing. He wished Dad was home more often, wished Mom was less busy during the day. He also wished that Graham would leave home and live with his friends, like he was always saying he would.

Climbing out of bed, KC picked up one of his trucks and walked out to the kitchen. The toy was virtually useless, a cheap plastic cement mixer which had lost all of its wheels. He suspected Graham had broken them off deliberately (Graham made a habit of destroying anything that KC loved) but he hadn't cried when he discovered the damage. He'd experienced much worse than a broken toy over the last few months. It was still dark outside. The house was dim and still, the lino cold against his feet.

He paused next to the kitchen table, looking out into the back room. Something was *different* about it this morning. It was like one of those dreams where you walked into your house and found yourself surrounded by strangely unfamiliar faces. The people you spoke to claimed to be

your family - and indeed they looked and sounded exactly like them - but you knew, deep inside, that they weren't. Everything had changed, but you couldn't explain how.

KC blinked several times, then walked carefully forward, placing the cement truck on the table. He'd suddenly lost all interest in playing. Oddly, he felt no fear, as perhaps he should have under the circumstances. Any other time, he might have sensed ghosts or monsters lurking in the darkness and run away to wake his parents up. But this time there was no hint of threat. He had a mystery to solve.

Then he saw it.

There was a sliver of light slashing across the floor of the back room. A fine, radiant shaft that might be cast by a light hidden behind a door which was ever so slightly ajar. And *that*, KC knew, was not possible. There were no doors on that side of the room. Only the one that led to -

No. It couldn't be.

But there it was:

The Door to Nowhere was open.

And light was spilling out of it.

KC gaped at this marvel in childish disbelief. His life had been a montage of daydreams and fantasies up to this point. Months ago, he'd imagined that the door might open into Narnia or some other magical land. But he'd tested that particular fancy dozens of times; he knew that the door was merely a cover for a brick wall, nothing else. His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing. Yet, here he was, the door was open, and there was light coming from somewhere *behind it*. Even from this distance he could tell it wasn't artificial light: it was too warm, too . . . *gentle*. It was a soft afternoon haze. *Another* impossibility. He could look out the back window to confirm that the sun wasn't even properly up.

I must be dreaming, KC thought.

But he wasn't. He was awake, slowly approaching the Door to Nowhere, already reaching out with his tiny hand to grip the golden knob. The one which was perfect for his height, as if the door had been built for him and him alone. His heart was racing, his breath shallow: not with fear, but with an oddly exultant feeling, an emotion poised midway between anticipation and excitement.

He hesitated, relishing the scent of flowers drifting through the door. *Roses*, KC was certain, fresh cut roses, like the ones he and his mother saw in the florist every time they walked into town. He could almost see them now, long-stemmed and carmine red and dripping with cool, sweet water. *Rosewater*, he thought for no reason at all, and swung the door open.

21.

A momentary confusion:

KC seemed to be looking into his own room.

No, not *his* room. But he had *recognized* it, nonetheless.

It was *her* room. The Girl's.

He was looking into The Girl's bedroom.

'Bedroom' wasn't the right word. There was another word, something his mother used on occasion, something that sounded dainty and enchanting, a word ladies might use. Pretty ladies.

Boudoir.

It flashed through his mind and was gone. The room was aglow with pastel colours, muted pinks and lilacs, traces of midday blue. Stepping through the doorway, he felt a curious shifting sensation, like those rare instants of extreme clarity when reality glides into lucid dreaming. It

would be years before KC could make such a comparison, but that was precisely what it was like: stepping consciously into a dream.

He halted, closed his eyes, and inhaled the subtle, flowing fragrance lacing the air. The smell of flowers struck him once again, but the roses were only masking something even more delicious and untouchable. He'd thought the room was empty, but he'd been wrong - the Girl was here; invisible, intangible, but present in every sense other than the physical.

He was breathing in The Girl.

KC opened her eyes.

22.

The bed was an antique four poster, covered with an ornate satin quilt and plumped with half a dozen pillows. There was a skirt and blouse on the bed, along with a small number of delicates. KC approached, only vaguely surprised that clothes had been laid out for her. It was her room, after all. She picked up the skirt and held it against her waist, as if taking its measure. It was a little girl's full circle, blue with a white lace trim around the hem. She turned to face the three-way mirror at the far end of the room. The mirror, like everything else in the (*boudoir*) room was the perfect size for a five year old child.

KC studied her reflection. She'd never noticed before how funny she looked in boy's PJ's. Cute, sweet, but funny all the same. A little girl posing as a boy. She felt a giggle bubbling up in her throat. It was the first time she'd felt like laughing in months. Yes, she looked funny, no question about it. She replaced the skirt on the bed, walked over to the door, and shut it quietly, once she'd ascertained that there was a knob on the inside. She supposed she wouldn't want to be trapped in here. Then again, maybe she wouldn't want to leave. Who knows?

She walked back to the bed and started unbuttoning her pajama top. Maybe this *was* a dream - that was the only way to explain what was happening - but KC was no longer sure *whose* dream it was. KC knew she wasn't asleep, so this *had* to be someone else's vision. Well, it didn't matter who was having it, KC was happy again. In a dream, anything could happen. Anything at all.

She stood naked, looking down at the underwear on the bed. This was nothing like the old throwaways from Mom's remnants bag. Brand new, almost sparkling. There was a singlet, a pair of briefs and some long socks, the kind with a lacey ruffle at the top. All pink, a very faint hue that was almost white. No bra, KC noted, but for some reason, she felt no disappointment. Right now, she didn't mind being a little girl. She reached down, picked up the panties, and turned to face the mirror. KC smiled at her reflection.

The smile flickered out after a few seconds. KC staggered back, recoiling from her image in gape-mouthed shock.

The mirror showed a *real* girl.

23.

KC's hands flashed down to her pubic region, looking down to see what had happened to her willy. Paradoxically, a glancing inspection affirmed that everything was still in its proper place. She handled her penis and testes gingerly, assuring herself that they hadn't simply evaporated off her body (not that this would have been such a bad idea, KC would later speculate, but it had been one hell of a fright at the time). She then looked back at the mirror.

The girl in the three-way had no genitals. Nothing at all. KC changed her position several times until she was absolutely certain of this. The flesh seemed to fold under and vanish between her legs, leaving only a dimple where KC's willy was.

What was going on?

KC walked up for a closer look. She noticed almost immediately that the girl in the mirror was not a precise duplicate of herself. She had larger eyes, and her face was fractionally softer and prettier. Her limbs and shoulders a little more rounded, her hair a little longer and curlier. She was more like KC's twin sister.

No, that wasn't right, not at all. The mirror-girl wasn't KC's twin, she *was* KC. The mirror was special; magical. It didn't show KC as she was, but rather as she *should* be. She swung around and wriggled her tushie at the three-way. It was plump and rosy-pink and smooth as a baby's bottom, so to speak. KC giggled to herself and looked away, blushing. She began to see how much fun she could have, playing her dress-up games in front of this magic mirror.

24.

All the clothes fitted perfectly. Fully dressed, she admired herself in triple view, turning around several times, trying to see herself from as many angles as possible. She finished by twirling about like a top. Her skirt flickered up, revealing her thighs, like a dancer from one of those old Hollywood musicals her parents enjoyed watching. She came to a stop, paused, and glanced around the room, curious to explore.

A large window looked out to a late afternoon landscape. It was a familiar setting; the backyard of their house, except that there were clumps of gum trees and no fence bordering the property. Perhaps she was looking into another time, 'the olden-days', as Mom was fond of calling the past. KC wondered if it were real. If she opened the window, could she climb out and go play in the shade of one of those eucalypts?

Well, she could investigate that possibility later. Best not roam too far right now. If, as she suspected, this were an incredibly vivid dream, what would happen to KC when whoever was having it woke up? She decided to stay near the door for the time being. Not that she was really worried, of course. This was The Girl's (*boudoir*) bedroom, not the spider-cupboard: nothing bad was going to happen to her in here. The rest of the house might have belonged to Graham, but this room was *hers*.

She opened the folding doors of the built-in wardrobes, and discovered they were full of girl's things; blouses, frocks, dresses, shoes, and skirts. The dressing table contained nighties and underwear and various knick-knacks - brushes, combs, lacey handkerchiefs and cotton scarves, hairclips, oddsox and buttons. A thousand small items for which KC had no name for. Things that might represent the bits and pieces of a little girl's life.

Her life.

KC's.

She looked over at the door for a few seconds, wondering what was happening out there, what time of day it might be. In here, it was nearing end of day. Beyond the door, it was probably still morning. Mom would just be getting up to put on the kettle and call Dad to breakfast. That was a good place, in some ways, but it wasn't perfect. It had some terrible, dark corners. It had fear and hurt and shame lurking in the shadows. Most of all, it had Graham and Franky and the spider-cupboard. The Girl's room was better. Much better. KC walked over and lay down on the bed, nestling in the cool satin depths of the quilt. It was just as she'd thought before: maybe she wouldn't mind being trapped in here, maybe she wouldn't want to leave. Ever.

I've come home, KC whispered to herself.