

HER

By Stephen Woodworth

SHE WAS ESPECIALLY anxious that day. I could feel her eyes blinking and roiling in the back of my head, sticky corneas scraping against the inside fabric of my long-haired wig. Sweat dampened her upper lip as her jaws strained against the duct tape I had used to seal her mouth.

She knew where we were. She knew my thoughts, just as I knew her fear.

“Extraordinary,” Dr. Vickers murmured, the circular lenses of his glasses shining and opaque as silver dollars. “May I see the....?” He made a euphemistic gesture with his hand.

I looked away and said nothing. Taking that as a yes, he stood and moved from behind his large mahogany desk to where I sat. Without waiting for me to assist him, he ran his long, spindly fingers through the hair at my temples, seeking the bobby pins which fastened the false locks to the thatch of real hair that ran across the top of my head. He peeled off the hairpiece as if it were a surgical dressing, and I shut my eyes in sympathy as the sudden light blinded her.

Dr. Vickers drew a sharp breath. “Extraordinary!” Leaning close, he touched her cheek with one manicured finger, and I fought to keep her still as the sealed scream ballooned in her mouth. Though my back was to him, I could see him through her eyes — a peering, prodding, white-coated gnome.

He pulled a penlight from his coat pocket, and flashed it in both of her eyes. Then I felt his fingernail pick at the tape at one corner of her mouth. I grabbed his wrist. “Don’t.”

He shook free of my grasp. “Mr. Harris, if I’m going to help you, you’ll have to trust my judgment.”

I swallowed. “Can you get rid of it?”

His lips parted, then closed again before he answered, and I should have known right then that he’d be no more help than the others. “Your...anomaly is, to my knowledge, utterly unique. However, I think with sufficient study —”

“Now. I want it gone.” I tensed as I felt her writhe inside our skull. “I have money.”

He regarded me with the restrained impatience of a schoolmaster. “Mr. Harris, if we attempt such a radical operation without proper analysis, it would almost certainly kill you.”

I carefully replaced my hairpiece and pressed it down. “If that’s what it takes,” I said. I rose and strode out of his office.

I didn’t see Elle that night. We were supposed to have dinner together at Pizza Hut, but I called and told her I didn’t feel good. It wasn’t really a lie.

When I got off the phone, I went into the bathroom and turned on the tub’s hot water tap full bore. As the tub filled, I stripped naked and regarded myself in the mirror. Not a bad body. An angular chest fringed with hair, muscular arms, a little slack in the gut from too much red meat and chocolate. And the face — normal, maybe even handsome.

The face of an ordinary man.

I glanced at the hand mirror which I kept face down beside the sink, the way a suicide keeps a loaded gun in the house. I ripped off the wig and snatched up the hand mirror, angling it so as to glare at her reflection in the wall mirror. It’s the only way we can see each other.

There were similarities between us, a sort of family resemblance. The shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose. But this face had a finer bone structure, smoother, smaller-pored skin, a delicacy of expression that could only be a woman’s. And everyone who had seen it recognized it for what it was.

She saw the hate in my stare and averted her eyes. I slapped the hand mirror down on the counter, but still felt the drip trickle down her cheek. The steam misting the wall mirror blurred my image to a pink smear.

The water in the tub stung my foot as I stepped in. I lay back, the heat pricking my skin with needles of pain, until everything but my face was submerged. Like bottled messages, little, frantic bubbles streamed past my ears to burst on the surface. I shut my eyes, and waited for them to stop.

She wouldn’t drown, though. I knew that from experience.

I finally took Elle out a week later. It went badly. I was late, the restaurant was slow, the movie was a dog. All evening, my head throbbed as if the scalp had shrunk over my cranium, compressing the brain within.

Afterward, I pulled up in front of the house Elle shared with her roommates, but let the engine idle a moment to cover my embarrassed silence.

“You look like you hated that flick even more than I did,” Elle said as I switched off the ignition. She wore a wry smirk, and her gray-blue eyes flickered with either amusement or irritation.

I rubbed my forehead. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Lee?” She brushed her knuckles along my forearm. “You okay?”

“Sure.”

I’d seen Dr. Vickers again, let him take X-rays and run some tests. Too risky, he concluded. Inoperable. Perhaps with more time...

Just like all the others.

“Would you like to come in for a while?”

Elle’s voice lilted suggestively. The light from the old mercury-vapor street lamp outside frosted her frizzy blond hair, and her baggy flannel shirt had slipped open to reveal the shadowed swell of her right breast.

I sighed. “I’d like to, but...”

She leaned closer until I could smell the crushed-petal scent of her perfume, feel her breath on my cheek. “But?”

“Ahh...work’s got me twisted.” I figured she’d heard me bitch enough about life at the warehouse that she’d let it go at that.

“Maybe you need to relax.” She planted a kiss on my lips. Her hands clasped my cheeks, then slid up to stroke my hair. My twin’s nose twitched beneath Elle’s fingers, as if trying to suppress a sneeze.

I flinched, bumping my head against the driver’s side window, and brushed her hands away. “Elle, I told you —”

She gave an exasperated groan. “Shit, is this the toupee thing again? Get over it! In fact...”

She reached, and I had to clutch my wig to keep her from snatching it away. “Elle! Stop!”

She drew a sharp breath, then relented. “Okay.” She collected her purse and opened the passenger door. “It’s been real, and it’s been fun...”

“...but it hasn’t been real fun,” I said in chorus. It was her favorite snide exit line. “I know. Sorry.”

She smiled one of her equivocal smiles, then gently squeezed my arm. ““Night.”

I still felt that tender pressure as I sagged against the steering wheel after she'd gone. It was those tiny gestures of warmth that made me see Elle's face on my bedroom ceiling at night.

And I was losing her, one/aux pas at a time.

The following morning, I started searching for another surgeon.

I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD when I heard her cry for the first time. Until then, she'd been merely another appendage, a deformity which my parents made me keep hidden, like a wart or a boil.

My friends and I were playing football on the front lawn of my house. Sid hiked the ball to me, and I charged forward. A moment later, hands grasped me from behind, and I was falling.

"Holy shit!" Tommy backpedaled from where he'd tackled me, flinging away the tousled wig in his hand as if it were a dead rat.

"Lee wears a wi-ig! Lee wears a wi-ig!" John-John, Sid's little brother, taunted. He hadn't seen what Tommy had.

Pete, Sid, and the others moved to surround me, leaving the forgotten football on the ground. She looked up at them with blinking, fearful eyes, and I could see their silhouettes eclipse the noontime sun.

"Jesus, what is it?" Pete whispered.

"It's a face, stupid, what does it look like?" Sid answered.

"It's a girl's face!" John-John pointed, bouncing on his heels excitedly.

"It's a girl's face!"

On his feet again, Tommy had joined the circle. "He's a goddamn freak! A faggy little girl-boy!"

I pushed myself up, and they all backed off a step. With both pairs of eyes open, I could see almost a full 360 degrees, and it made me dizzy. A ring of faces tightened around me, leering and chanting. "Girl-boy! Girl-boy! Faggy little girl-boy!"

I spun left and right, shouting. "Shut up! Shut up!"

Then I heard her hiccupping sobs.

That really set them off. “Oh, look! She’s crying! Don’t cry, little girl-boy! Little sissy! Little faggot!”

I felt tears stream down burning cheeks, and was furious that I couldn’t stop them. I wanted to cry myself, but I converted my shame to anger and shoved Tommy as hard as I could. “STOP IT!”

He tottered but kept his feet. He clamped his left hand on my forearm until it bruised the skin, then thrust his right fist into my gut. I hunched over, gasping for breath, and he pushed me down. With the others cheering around us, Tommy sat astride my stomach and grabbed hold of my head, grinding my girl-face into the ground. Her shrill wail died, and I tasted the grass and dirt on her tongue. Yet I felt glad, because she was getting what she deserved for humiliating us.

Then, all at once, the jeering stopped. Tommy got off me, and I saw my father looking down on me, his face flushed, his pants and shirt still covered with sawdust from his workshop.

Relieved, I stood and started to brush off my Tuffskins, expecting him to cuss out the other boys for teasing me. Instead, he grabbed the collar of my shirt.

“Come on,” he muttered and yanked me toward the front door. He didn’t spare a glance at the others, kept his gaze down as if afraid of them. I couldn’t see anything behind me, and realized she must have shut her eyes.

Once inside the house, Dad seized my shoulders and leaned forward to shout in my face. “What the hell were you doing out there? Didn’t I tell you to be careful?”

“Yeah.” I wanted to tell him that I only played football because it was his favorite sport, and I really hated the game. Instead, I just stared down at my shoes.

“Yeah?” Is that all you have to say? Do you have any idea —” His breath caught in his throat, as if a pressure valve had tightened in his chest. He wiped a hand over his face, and calmed himself enough to go on. “We’re gonna have to move, I hope you know. Daddy’s gonna have to quit his job, we’re gonna have to sell the house, and move to some state where no one knows us and start all over again —”

“Don’t you think you’re overreacting?” Mom asked, her voice barely audible. She’d withdrawn to a far corner of the den, where she stood hugging herself. “I mean, it was just a bunch of kids —”

He turned on her with the suddenness of a cobra. “And no one’s gonna believe them, right? The hell they won’t! We’ll have goddamn TV crews on our

doorstep within a week. All wanting to see the local freak!”

Mom’s mouth shrank to a tiny oval. “Jim, don’t...”

“Christ, seven years! Seven years, I managed to keep this under wraps so he could live some kind of normal life, and now —” He sliced the air with his arm. “I don’t know, Claire, maybe we should just sell him to the circus. Would you like that, Lee? Dress you in a little tutu and sit you on an elephant—”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Mom shrieked. “He’s still our son!”

Dad gave an arid laugh. “Yeah. My son.” He glowered at me. “Go to your room.”

I went and buried myself between the Star Wars sheets on my bed. Dad began shouting at Mom again.

Then I heard her start to whimper.

I wrapped my pillow around my head and squeezed. “Shut up, shut up, shut up...”

As Dad promised, we moved within a month, living in an apartment until escrow closed on our new house. In our new neighborhood, in my new school, with my new friends, I was very, very careful. I did all the normal things the other boys did, and even took up football again. The game felt much better with a shiny, hard helmet on. The locker room could be a problem, but I had a good shoulder-length wig and lots of bobby pins. By senior year, I was a starting half-back and a letterman.

Dad died of a coronary the year I started college. I didn’t cry at his funeral. I think he would have been proud of me.

Of course, I’d dated girls from the time I was fourteen, got laid by the time I was sixteen. It was expected. I warned them about my hairpiece, told them I got burnt in a fire as a kid and that I was ashamed of my bare, scarred scalp. If, after the first month or two, they said they wanted to see anyway, to know me better, I simply left.

Until Elle.

She lay beside me in the downtown park, the crumpled bag containing the remains of our Subway sandwiches between us. It was late February, and we basked in the first real California-style sunshine of a gray and rainy winter. Elle had cut two of her Master’s history classes for the occasion.

“Isn’t this marvelous?” She stretched languidly and ruffled her hair. The hem of her T-shirt came untucked from her jeans, revealing a strip of her tummy. Her belly button was unique — neither an innie nor an outie, but nearly level with the surface of her skin. I fought the temptation to touch it right then. “Days like this I wish I could just lie here forever.” She pointed her bare toes like a ballet dancer, letting the blades of grass tickle up between them.

“Yeah.” I sat with my elbows on my knees, twisting the stem of a dandelion in my fingers, and I strained to think of something romantic to say, scanning the vacant blue sky for inspiration.

Suddenly restless, Elle sat up and peered at the grass around her as if looking for a lost contact lens. “I remember coming here as a kid. They used to have ducks in the pond over there.” She pointed, then resumed her search. “Mom would let me bring bread scraps for ‘em—ah!” She plucked a tiny clover flower and held it to her ear, threading the stem through her pierced lobe. The flower stayed as she pulled her hand away and grinned. “Ta-da!”

I chuckled, and it eased the tightness in my chest. Still, I didn’t know what to say, and there was a tension in my limbs, as if my body knew what I was supposed to do and wanted to go on without me.

“Wait! Let’s see if I can still do this...” Elle leapt to her feet and bounded off to the left about ten yards. With a running start, she turned cartwheels in front of me, golden hair tumbling, and I longed to be like her, to skip and dance and do handsprings in the sunlight and not care who was watching or what they thought.

The last thing I remember doing that afternoon was taking off my shoes.

I next became aware of a rhythmic clacking sound and the smell of melting butter. My vision faded in, and I found myself standing in the kitchen of my apartment holding a stainless steel bowl in one hand and a fork in the other. I watched as my hand used the fork to beat the eggs in the bowl. Though I willed it to stop, it continued on autopilot. Behind me, a woman’s voice hummed a cheerful tune.

“Elle?” I called, my tongue sluggish.

The woman’s voice stopped.

At the same time, my hands went slack, as if they forgot what they were doing, and the fork and bowl clattered to the floor, spattering my jeans with raw egg.

“Shit!” I staggered back from the upset bowl, now bleeding yolk onto the linoleum. I gaped around in confusion, saw the frying pan over a low flame on the

stove, the bowls of grated cheese and sliced mushrooms on the counter beside it.

“Elle!” I checked the living room and bedroom. I was alone.

A tremor ran through me. I grabbed the back of my head and felt her bare cheeks, her soft lips.

The duct tape was gone.

She’d been in control for hours, I thought, shaking. Seeing with my eyes, speaking with my voice. I ran to the phone and dialed Elle’s number, trying to steady my breathing as I waited for her to answer. “Hello?”

“Hi. It’s me.” I didn’t know whether to apologize or what, and I feared she’d hang up the moment she heard me.

“Hey.” Her voice was warm and inviting, and I could sense the smile that accompanied it.

“Look, about this afternoon...”

She giggled. “As I recall, the hide-and-seek was your idea. I hope I wasn’t too hard to find.”

I rubbed my forehead, straining to remember. “Did — did you have a good time?”

“No.” She paused. “I had a great time. I just wish I didn’t have this mid-term tomorrow so I could’ve stayed for dinner. You left me hungry,” she added with a sensual purr.

“Thanks.” I forced a chuckle, gnawing at my lower lip.

“Lee? Is something wrong?”

“No. No, I just wanted to tell you what a great time I had. We should do it again sometime.” My mouth twisted. “Love you.”

There was a long pause at the other end, and I thought, Oh, shit, that did it.

“I love you, too.”

My heart clenched. “Call me tomorrow,” my mouth said. “Let me know how the test went.”

“Okay.”

She said good-bye, and I hung up, a queasiness in my stomach.

That feeling remained with me during the following week, the feeling you have in dreams where you find yourself naked out in public. I became acutely self-conscious of all my actions and mannerisms—how I walked, how I sat, how I spoke. Whenever I found myself drifting off into daydreams, I flinched and glanced at my watch to see how much time I'd lost. At night, I slept with my jaws clenched shut, the tension giving my mind some concrete sensation to grasp as my consciousness slipped away. I often woke with a headache, which also helped to anchor me in my skull.

For once, I appreciated the donkey-work of the warehouse. Fetching case after case of ceramic tile for the orders we had to fill, listening to the rest of the crew describe in pornographic detail the women they'd slept with over the weekend, I settled into a comfortable groove of mindless motion.

“So what about you, man?” Scott asked out of the blue. A spindly bean-pole of a guy whose arms jutted out of his Lakers jersey like bent soda straws, he'd just finished telling us about his fifth conquest in as many weeks. “Getting anywhere with La Belle Elle?”

I stood on the penultimate rung of a twenty-foot ladder, scanning the shelves for a stock number, so it took me a second to realize he was talking to me. “Huh? Oh, yeah, Elle's fantastic.” I slid a thirty-pound box off a shelf, bracing my shins against the ladder's top step as I swayed with the weight. “We had a wild time in the park last Thursday,” I added, descending with the box. It might have been true, for all I could remember about that day.

“All right! The kid has hisself some nookie!” Tony, a burly weightlifter with a spiky black crewcut, clapped and whistled.

Grinning, Scott took the box from me as I got off the ladder and set it on the pallet we'd stacked with the latest order. “About time, too. We were beginning to wonder about you, boy.”

I glared at him. “What do you mean?”

“Hey, we've all seen you looking at Tony's ass, okay?” He winked at Tony. They both laughed.

“So what are you saying?” I snapped.

Scott saw the expression on my face, and his shit-eating grin disappeared. “Uh, nothing.”

“No, come on. Tell me.”

He shrugged and smiled nervously. “Take it easy, man, it was just a joke...”

“But there must be something about me to make fun of, right?” My voice quavered on the point of cracking. “Tell me what’s so goddamn funny.”

Scott backed off a step and held up his hands. “Nothing. Just a joke.”

I looked over to see Tony and Carlos glance away, hastily shifting their attention to the boxes at their feet.

“Shit,” I muttered, and climbed the ladder again.

I worked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, sifting my memory to find any lapses I’d had at work during the past week. If she’d taken control...if Scott and the others had seen me when she was in control...My face burned as I imagined their contemptuous stares and suppressed laughter.

I brooded in silence at the dinner table that night. Elle had come over to my apartment to cook for me in her latest attempt to convert me to vegetarianism — lentil soup and French bread. Though it tasted fine, I stirred the pasty, greenish soup without an appetite, staring at the swirls I made.

Elle cast a withering look at me from across the table. “That good, eh?”

“Hmm? No, no, it’s great.” Guilty, I shoveled a spoonful into my mouth and nodded my appreciation.

“Thanks,” she said dubiously. She stared into her own bowl for a while. “Is it my breath,” she asked at last, “or my scintillating conversation?”

“What?”

“You! You’re in a funk.”

“I am not! I’m just...thinking.” I took a big bite of bread to chew on as an excuse not to talk.

“About...?” With a sarcastic smile, Elle gestured for me to elaborate. “Let’s verbalize here.”

Gooseflesh rose on my arms as her jaws strained at their seal. I shook my head, both to dismiss Elle’s question and to reassert my control. “Just...a bad day at work.”

Elle's expression softened. "The boss?"

"Nah, it's the other guys. They're all assholes." I rubbed my forehead.

"Have you thought about getting a better job? You have a degree..."

"Yeah, and the private sector's clamoring for art history majors."

"That's not the point. It shows what you can do—"

"Elle, I'd really rather drop this."

"Okay, okay." She eyed me thoughtfully as she took a couple more mouthfuls of soup, then waggled her empty spoon at me. "You know what you need—"

She dropped the spoon in her bowl and rose from her chair. "Stand up."

"What? I—"

She crossed to my chair. "Come on. Elle says, 'Stand up.'"

With a sigh, I abandoned my own soup and did as she commanded.

"Now, Elle says, 'Stand over there.'"

 She pointed to the center of the living room floor.

I went to the indicated spot and shrugged.

"Elle says, 'Take off your shirt.'"

I groaned. "Elle, I'm not in the mood—"

She gave me a schoolmarmish glare, arms akimbo, tapping her foot. I chuckled in spite of myself, unbuttoned my shirt, and slipped it off. "Now what, Mistress?" I asked, tossing the shirt aside.

She giggled. "On your belly, slave."

I lay face-down on the carpet as she came and crouched beside me. "Is this going to hurt?"

"Just a little." She straddled my butt and began to knead the muscles of my back with her fingers. "Man, you're tight. No wonder you're on edge."

I winced as she rubbed the taut cords of my shoulders. Her hands pulled the tension from my body, and I let out a soft moan. For the first time that evening, I

forgot about the warehouse, about Scott and Tony, about her, and lost myself in the present, in Elle's firm but tender touch.

"That's it," she murmured. "Just let it all go."

My chin resting on my hands, I drifted into a light doze. I only awoke when the gentle rocking motion of the massage abruptly stopped.

"How did you do that?" Elle asked.

Groggy, I scowled and half-opened my eyes. "Do what?"

"Your scalp...moved—"

Before my sluggish brain understood what she meant, Elle had worked her fingers up underneath the padding of my wig.

"No — !" I yelped as the bobby pins were yanked from my hair, and tried to wriggle out from under her, but I knew it was too late.

Though she was still behind me, I could now see her awestruck face, see the wig in her hand. Elle's mouth hung open, but the high-pitched, feminine whimper I heard stirred in my own throat.

Elle stood and staggered backward, staring at me in confusion. "What are you?"

I rolled on my back like an overturned turtle and lurched forward onto my knees. Elle shrank from me as I stood and stretched an arm toward her. "Wait! Please—"

"My God...what is it?" Dropping the wig, Elle stumbled back into the dining room and sank onto a chair, her hands pressed over her mouth.

"It — it's just a birth defect. Like a — an extra finger or something." I knelt in front of her and took her hands in mine. "I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you, I was so afraid—"

"Turn around." Her voice was hoarse, her face stony and pale.

I squeezed her hands before releasing them, then did as she said. Quivering, I shut my own eyes and met Elle's tremulous gaze with those other eyes.

Elle reached to touch my twin's cheek, but her finger hovered just above the skin as if repelled by magnetic force. "Does she talk?"

“No.” A shiver rippled up my spine. “Just some noises. Sometimes she laughs. Cries.”

Elle stared into my twin’s eyes, a look of strange, fearful recognition on her face. “No.”

She pushed herself to her feet and fumbled for the purse which sat on an adjacent chair. “I’m — I’ve got to go.”

I jerked upright and caught hold of her arm as she headed toward the front door. “No, don’t leave! I promise, you’ll never have to see it again.”

She tensed, and refused to look at me. “I can’t — I’m sorry...”

I let go of her, and she hurried out the door.

I stood there for almost a minute, my fists like matching hammers pressed to my temples. Then I reached back and ripped the duct tape off her mouth.

This time I wanted to hear her.

I leaned up against the wall and bowed my head. With a sharp cry, I jerked my head upright to crack it against the concrete. When she shrieked, I did it again. And again, until the flesh at the back of my skull stung with bruised tissue. The two of us screamed in harmony.

About twenty minutes later, a heavy-set cop with squarish, wire-rimmed glasses rang my doorbell. I answered the door in a bathrobe, skin still clammy from the shower, my wig disheveled but in place.

The cop shifted his gaze from my face to peer past me into the living room. “Sorry to bother you, Mister...”

“Harris.”

“Mister Harris. We received a call about a possible domestic violence incident in this apartment complex, and wanted to know if you’d seen or heard anything.”

I shrugged and shook my head. “Sorry. Can’t help you.”

“Mind if I come in for a sec?”

“Sure.” I stepped aside to let him enter.

“Someone apparently heard a woman cry out. Said it sounded like it came from in here.” He made a cursory inspection of the living room, then ambled toward

the open bedroom door.

“Not here. I live alone.”

“Have any guests this evening?” He surveyed the dual place-settings of dirty dishes on the dining room table.

“My girlfriend. She left some time ago, though.”

“Uh-huh.” He casually poked his head into the bedroom and bathroom as if admiring the decor. “Well, it seems pretty quiet now.” He moved back toward the front door. “Like I said, sorry to bother you, but we have to check these things out.”

“No problem.” Beneath the wig, a trickle of blood ran from her broken nose, over her swollen lips and scraped chin to drip down my back. “You can’t be too careful.”

I called in sick at work the following morning and spent most of the day in bed with the curtains drawn. The telephone didn’t ring. About four o’clock, I got up, went to the bathroom in my boxer shorts, and picked up the hand mirror on the counter.

Her face hung slack, as if anaesthetized, her eyes shut, her lips slightly parted. Though I hadn’t replaced the duct tape, she hadn’t made a sound since last night. Her nose had stopped bleeding, but was puffy and crooked. Her cheeks were blotched with purple. I touched one of the tender spots, but she didn’t react. I lifted one eyelid, but the iris beneath seemed clouded, vacant.

An unexpected tremor of fear trilled through me — the same sort of panic you feel when you fall asleep on your arm and awake in the middle of the night to find that your hand has become a lump of lifeless meat.

I stayed home the next two days as well, drowning my brain in daytime television. I risked getting fired, but I didn’t care. Every evening at eight I called Elle’s number. Her answering machine always responded, and each time I remained silent, leaving an eloquent span of blank tape after the beep.

I didn’t expect to see her again. I certainly didn’t expect her to pound on my door after eleven o’clock on Saturday night.

As I inched the door open, she looked at me over the taut door chain with the guilty expression of a child who has either done something bad or is about to. “Can I come in?”

I rubbed the beard stubble on my cheeks as if to wipe it off and patted down

the cowlicks in my wig. “Uh...sure.”

I undid the chain and let her in, shifting my feet as she saw the litter of Budweiser cans and Doritos bags surrounding the easy chair in front of my living room TV. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting...”

“I know. I should’ve called, but...I wasn’t sure.” She hugged herself. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” We fell into an exhausted embrace.

Her lips brushed my ear as I nuzzled her neck. “I want to see her again,” she whispered.

This time, it was my turn to recoil in revulsion. “What? Why on Earth B—”

Her hands fluttered, trying to speak for her. “I — I can’t explain. There’s something I have to see.” She drew close again, her eyes imploring. “Something I have to know.”

I wilted against her, gripping her to my chest, figuring that I would lose her no matter what I did.

We went into the bedroom and knelt on my futon. Jaw set, I sat with marble stoicism and let her take off the wig once more. I felt a perverse relief when I heard Elle gasp, for the anxiety and uncertainty would finally be gone. They would leave with Elle.

Elle lightly prodded one of the bruised cheeks, and I winced. “My God, what did you do?”

“We had a little fight.”

“Is she — ?”

“I don’t know.”

Elle traced a fingertip over the peach-tender skin, her breath coming in ragged sighs. “She can’t be.”

A fatalistic sorrow drained the tension from my limbs, and my vision clouded. I blinked to clear the mistiness from my sight, and when I looked again, everything had snapped into sharp focus and I found Elle’s face hovering directly in front of me. I saw again all those qualities in her I had loved and coveted — her inner strength and outward tenderness, her sensuality and sensitivity — and it made me want to weep. The breeze-soft touch of her fingers served as a balm to the dull

soreness of my wounds.

Elle peered into my eyes, and again recognition dawned on her face. “It was you,” she breathed. “In the park — you had that same look...”

My mouth opened, but I couldn’t find my voice. Perhaps I was afraid to hear it.

Then Elle pressed her lips to mine, and I no longer needed to speak.

Our mouths and tongues moved in perfect counterpoise, now giving now receiving, gently enough so that the sting of my grazed skin became only a tingle. I kissed her neck, and Elle unbuttoned her blouse.

As I bent to lick at the breasts she offered to me, though, my backward body lost its balance and almost tipped over, my misdirected arms flailing out behind me, groping for something to hold onto. Elle steadied me, laughing. I giggled in return.

Peeling off her clothes, Elle nudged me into a prone position, my body belly-down on the mattress, my frontward face smothered in a pillow, inert and immobile as a discarded mask. Elle crawled over me, letting me make love to each part of her in turn. Sitting up, she arched her thighs over my face and dipped her pubic mound onto my waiting mouth, shuddering as I explored inside her with my tongue.

We lay beside each other for a long time after it was over, communicating only with our eyes. Though I wanted to watch her placid sleeping form all night, I eventually drifted off.

I awoke later as if jarred by a sudden sound. The room was still dark. Instinctively, my hand went to my jaw, where I felt my bristly, unshaven skin. I peered out once more from behind my male face and frowned, wondering if I’d only dreamt the last few hours.

“Love me,” a soft voice croaked.

I turned toward Elle. “What?”

But I could tell by the measured rise and fall of Elle’s chest that she was asleep.

“Love me,” the voice pleaded again. A laryngitic rasp, weak with disuse. “Please.”

I trembled. She’d never spoken to me before. Or perhaps I just hadn’t listened until now.

I stroked her cheek, my fingers running across the damp track of a tear.
“Yes,” I repeated, “love me.”

We didn't speak again that night, for we knew our thoughts were the same.

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By Stephen Woodworth

A native Californian now living in Fullerton, Stephen Woodworth is a First Place winner of the Writers of the Future Contest. His stories have appeared in a handful of anthologies and magazines, including *Aboriginal SI*, *Hot Blood*, *Dead of Night*, and *After Shocks*. He also enjoys acting in local theater and says he was visible for approximately three nanoseconds” as an extra in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

Steve's first story for us, like much of his fiction, explores issues of gender and self. It's edgy and a bit grotesque and delivers some good shocks.