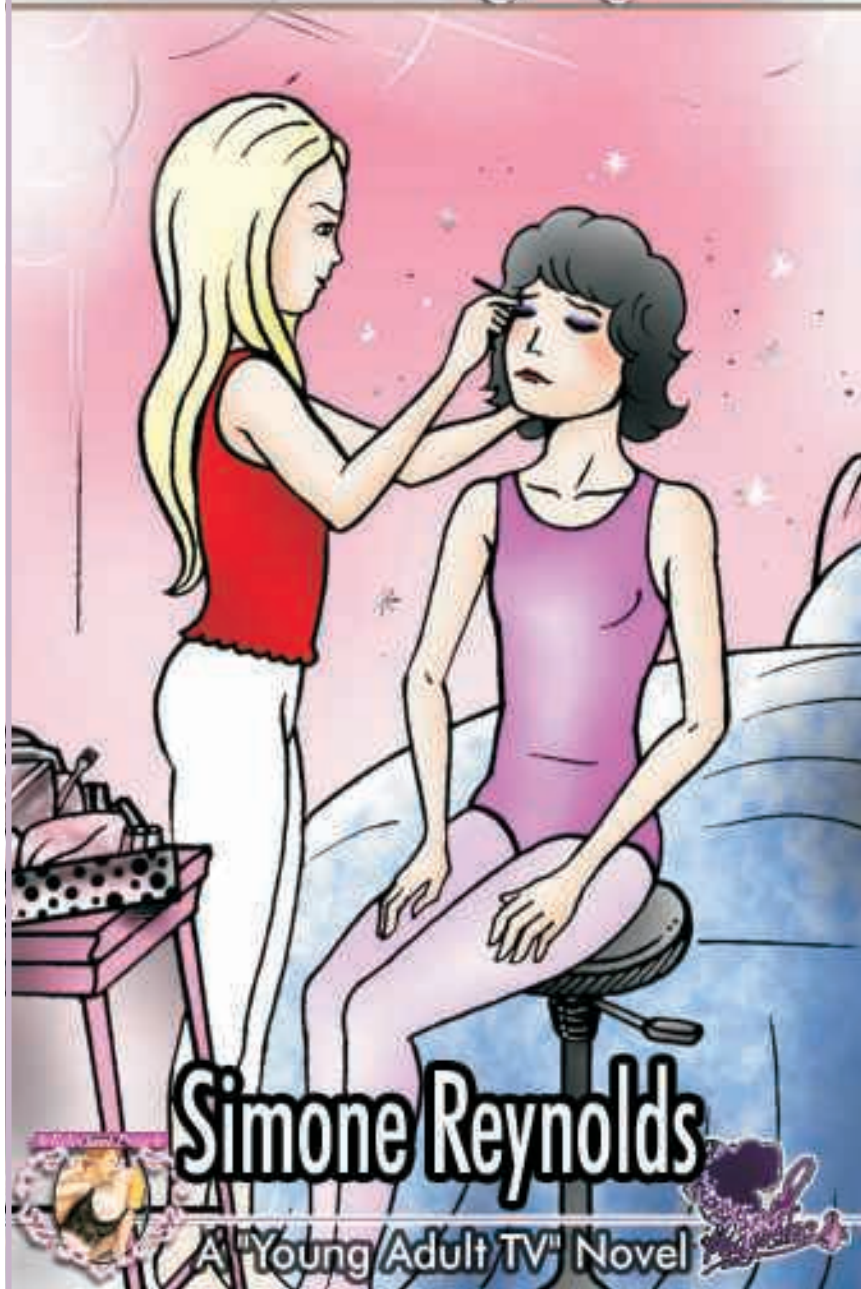


A Life-Changing Meal



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A Life-changing Meal

by **Simone Reynolds**

I think it started like this, or at least that's what I reckon with the spectacles of hindsight.

“Margaret, I've got a surprise for you!” It was my father calling from the kitchen. She didn't immediately move from the sofa.

“What is it, Bob?” she replied with an air of weary resignation.

“You'll have to come to the kitchen to look.” My father sounded very excited.

We all traipsed into the kitchen to see what was causing this excitement. There stretched out on the table was a smallish wild boar. My father stood beside it, beaming all across his face.

The boar had passed the cute appearance that they have as babies, but the stripes along its body were present and it still looked a sorry sight. It appeared pretty much undamaged, so the fatal element must have been internal. Wild boars are plentiful in

some parts of the south of England where escapees from farms have returned to the wild and, like deer, have become quite common, if not often seen.

“It ran across the road and I hit it with the Land Rover. I couldn’t miss it really. I didn’t want to leave it lying there and they are supposed to be wonderful to eat.”

My mother didn’t look quite so delighted.

“Bob, my meat comes in little trays with a shrink wrap cover, not from the wild. What am I supposed to do with it?” She appeared exasperated by Father’s latest folly.

“Don’t worry, dear, I will help you butcher it and then we can freeze it and cook it bit by bit. Don’t you worry your pretty little head!” He knew that last remark was taking a bit of a chance and he was chased out of the kitchen yelling with laughter as my mother pursued him with the bread knife.

My sister Sally was almost in tears at the sight of the boar.

“There’s no way I’m eating it,” she declared. “I’d rather become a vegetarian.” She was a couple of years younger than me at 13, and, as a girl, more sensitive, I suppose. But let’s be honest; most people would have caviled at eating the little fellow if they had seen it.

Once my parents returned to the kitchen, they set to work on the poor little creature and soon a pile of joints was produced, plus the head. The guts were disposed of and a leg was selected for dinner the following day.

My father had decided that he would take charge of the catering for our first boar meal, not that he often did the cooking, but he wanted the honour of dealing with the product of his hunting expedition –

as he now regarded it, much to our amusement. Anyone less of a hunter-gatherer it is difficult to imagine. After all, he worked in a chemist shop.

Nevertheless, he was a big muscular man and by the time he was turned out in his cook's hat and apron, he certainly looked the part.

Prompt at 7:30 pm we were all summoned to the kitchen by the bell announcing the meal and he was ready to serve. The four of us gathered round the table and he delivered the various dishes to the table and, finally, the plate of meat ready to be carved. When he sliced into it, it looked a little pink to me, but he assured us that it was just fine. I had a nice portion on my plate, with Sally beside me only getting the roast vegetables and a vegetarian sausage.

I had to admit that it tasted wonderful, one of the best pieces of meat that I had ever eaten. Obviously, I had to be diplomatic when I complemented him so as not to annoy my mother, who did most of the cookery (and indeed everything else round the house).

"That's pretty good for a casual cook!" I applauded.

"Bob, you've done well there," my mother followed suit, "It could be your real calling."

"I think I will stay as a specialist dishwasher actually," he replied modestly, but you could tell he was very pleased with himself.

Sally was very quiet; she was still thinking of the poor animal that had provided our meal. Fortunately, the chocolate cheesecake, courtesy of Sainsbury's, was some recompense.

The next day was back to school. I had been told not to mention the boar in case it belonged to any of

the farmers in the community where we lived. I did comment that my father should have thought about that before we ate it. The rest of the meat was stored away in the freezer and I gained the impression that my mother was not in any rush to use it.

About three weeks later, I went down with a sore throat and felt absolutely terrible. I had a temperature and all my throat swelled up. I looked at myself in my mirror and I would have passed for a chipmunk or something. I could hardly drag myself out of bed and my mother decided I could stay off school – something of a first. It meant I could miss out the bits I didn't like such as English and Music, but I also couldn't do my athletics training, which I enjoyed. The doctor was called out to see me.

Dr. Fisher was an oldish man which, looking back, probably means in his fifties. A friendly balding man, I had always enjoyed going to see him, even though some trips were for vaccinations. He was one of those doctors who does inspire a bit of confidence that he knows what he is doing. Unlike his practice nurse, who I had seen about my athlete's foot who had taken ages just to give a prescription.

After a careful examination, looking down my throat, and even feeling my balls (perhaps he enjoyed that more than me) he pronounced.

“Well, I think he's got a dose of Glandular Fever. Pretty typical at this age. Have you been kissing the girls, young man?” I would have blushed, if I hadn't already been red.

“It can last quite a while I'm sorry to say, often three or four weeks, so take things easy and I will do a few blood tests to check on my diagnosis. If you take a turn for the worse or anything, give me a call.”

He was soon gone, having taken a couple of tubes of my precious blood.

“Well, it sounds like rest for you, Michael” said my mother. “If you aren’t too ill, you’ll be able to help round the house, I’ll be able to show you how to dust and clean.”

“Here am I, your poor son and you want to make my illness worse, I’m an invalid. I need nurturing and caring for – not housework,” I complained. All she did was laugh, not much sympathy there for a stricken son! Looking back on this, I do feel that teenagers are a bit pathetic.

Actually, I had treated it in a light-hearted manner at first, but over the coming days I felt dog-tired and it was an effort to drag myself out of bed. There was no question of going to school or doing much else. I certainly didn’t feel like playing on the computer. I just sat and read books while I was awake.

By the end of Week Two, I was feeling quite a bit better, if still not very energetic and I was getting up for meals. I hadn’t much to do as I had finished my small stock of books and needed something new.

“Well, there are some magazines. Old car mags of your father’s and my coffee break things,” my mother suggested.

The former sounded eminently tedious and I was reduced to reading “Take a Break.” This proved to be quite amusing with short stories from life about unfaithful boyfriends and catching Chlamydia or getting sunburnt. It wasn’t long before I was addicted to trivia. There were also my mother’s other magazines, such as Cosmopolitan and although some things were perhaps a bit “age inappropriate,” I did learn a lot about fashion and what women think about men. All very handy and I started to find them quite educational.

It was about Week Three when Dr. Fisher rang up to find how things were progressing. I was at the awkward age when they don't know whether to talk to the patient or their parent. Anyway, he got me because I answered the telephone, but I think he would have preferred my mother.

“Well, Michael, we have some results and when I came to see you, I thought you might have the kissing disease – Epstein-Barr virus infection it's called in proper terms – but you haven't had it. Instead you caught Toxoplasmosis, a bit of a mouthful I'm afraid, but no doubt you can Google it. Essentially, it's a little parasite that you catch from animals, usually kittens, causing the same symptoms as Epstein-Barr. You should settle down OK, but as you know now, it can be a bit miserable. Anyway, you might be ready to try a bit of school next week”.

“We don't have a kitten,” I pointed out.

“Oh, I suppose not. Have you eaten any poorly-cooked meat or raw sausages do you think?”

“I might have, I suppose,” I responded in a non-committal way even if my mind went straight to the wild boar. “I'll ask Mum what she thinks.”

When my mother came home, I told her about the call.

“Apparently, I have Toxoplasmosis and it comes from kittens or eating raw or undercooked meat, so he said.” I waited in anticipation.

“Well, there's only that boar, as I am sure you worked out, that your father provided. We've only had that one pieced so far. None of the rest of us have been affected,” she mused.

“Sally didn't eat any, did she?”

“True enough, maybe your father and I are immune, or had it already. He’s not the cook he imagined himself to be, is he?” she noted with some evident glee.

“No, but it has made me ill.”

“Oh, well you’ll soon get over that I’m sure and we’ll be able to tease your father forever!” She was positively excited by the prospect, it seemed. “So, who is going to break it to him?”

“You can slip it in when you think he’s being most irritating, knowing you,” I smiled.

“Cheeky monkey. If you weren’t an invalid, I would administer a clip round the ear.”

I wasn’t really ready for school, I was much too tired during the day, falling asleep frequently. I had a try out in the fresh air, first in our garden on the patio, watching the blue tits at the feeder. The breeze was something of an improvement on the atmosphere indoors. I could do a tour round the plants and vegetable patch, about 200 yards, but needed a sit by the time I returned. I was provided with a seat so that I could rest between “tours” and my mother asked what I would like to read. I had already consumed all the magazines, and she did not approve of daytime television. I didn’t really have any books left, so she had to try Barbara’s room – she was my 19-year old sister, then at University.

“I have these about Tracy Beaker – you know those Jacqueline Wilson books.”

She may be a famous author, but I hadn’t heard about her. I wasn’t really her target audience as it were.

“I’ve also got these old books – Ann of Green Gables” (I think there were still dinosaurs when that

was written) “and the Chalet School. They are my old books.”

“I’m not really sure about those but I’ll give Tracy a go!” I smiled.

I am sure that many of you will have heard of these books already, perhaps even read some. I was quite impressed by Tracy Beaker, a girl who is eventually adopted and gets into all kinds of scrapes. I thought the four that I read were pretty good and I was reduced to reading my mother’s own books. They were interesting, but of a definitely different era. As I went along, I was surprised that I could identify with some of the characters, which made the stories more engrossing. In fact, being off school had left me very much in the woman’s world of literature and housework. I’m sure it isn’t OK to write that these days.

Next week I tried mornings back at school and by the end of the 5-day period, I was fully integrated back into the system. Apart from doing sport that is, that was just a step too far, I was quite pleased to skive off that for a bit longer. I had missed quite a lot, but some of teachers felt that the effects hadn’t been too bad. My English teacher thought that I had improved. When I remarked that it didn’t say much for her teaching, it earned me an extra assignment. I had to write a 1000-word story over the weekend to read to the class when we next met. Bugger. Me and my big mouth, but the rest of the class had laughed so at least I gained some Brownie Points with them.

Fortunately, I now had lots of literary experience to fall back on and I picked ideas from the stories I had been reading. My tale was about an adopted girl trying to organize going to a school party, with cruel, cruel parents not wanting to buy her a dress. It was all about getting one from a Jumble Sale and adapting it to her size, etc. It was quite detailed with terms on sewing that I had learned from my mother’s old magazines.

Miss James, the teacher, made me read it to the whole class (after she had checked it for risky elements) and was clearly a little impressed.

“Michael, you are a reformed character, you might even pass your GCSE with an acceptable grade. Why did you adopt the voice of a girl?” I think she was genuinely interested to know this.

“Well, I thought it would be more of an intellectual challenge, I suppose.” Actually, it was because I had farmed other works for my story.

“You displayed such a knowledge of sewing that perhaps you ought to join the fabric technology section, instead of woodwork. I’ll ask Mr. Stewart for you.”

The class laughed at that too, of course.

I suppose that it was about two weeks later when I was getting ready for bed. I stood looking at myself just in my underpants. They looked quite ugly and tatty to me. They didn’t seem right somehow. The only way I can describe it is that I sensed from inside that these weren’t the sort of pants I should be wearing as though they were alien or actually going to harm me. If that sounds like a weird sensation it was; it made no sense to me at all. These were pants I had been wearing all my life. Not that actual pair of course, but in that style.

After thinking about it for two or three minutes, I took them off and replaced them with my pajamas and went to bed.

The next morning all was fine and I dressed as normal and hurried down to breakfast to get on with the day.

A couple of days later I had the same sensation, that I didn’t want these pants, they were not for me and I shouldn’t be wearing them. The following morn-

ing the feeling hadn't worn off and I didn't feel I could put them on. My mind was telling me not to do it. It felt as though part of my mind was partitioned off as a separate person, commanding me as though I was his puppet. I thought at first there was something on my back. I looked in the mirror, but there was nothing to see.

"This is ridiculous," I said to myself, but it was against a background of nagging doubt. Could I force them on? Yes. Just about, but I felt most uncomfortable. By the time I had my trousers on I was OK, but I was sweating by then. If I had the feeling again, what was I to do? I decided to check out Barbara's room to see what she had.

I sneaked down the corridor and into her room. I opened a couple of drawers in her chest and found a neat little pile of women's knickers. That looked better so I took a couple of pairs and headed back to my room and changed. Fortunately, the pair I choose looked absolutely fine and I relaxed at last, with my bizarre feelings subsiding. They were full-sized, black, with Lycra and once on, they formed a snug fit over my bottom and held my penis and balls neatly in place, if a little squashed. I put the rest of my clothes on and was right for the day.

The next morning, I tried with my underpants again and it was just as bad. I couldn't keep them on and had to have the second pair of Barbara's.

What was I to do? I couldn't just pinch Barbara's, my mother would notice and so eventually, I imagined, would Barbara, albeit not until the end of term, when she returned from University. I eventually decided on a plan of action.

“Mum, some of my pants are wearing out rather and I was wondering if it would be OK to get some more.” I produced a very decrepit pair which I had helped to deteriorate further with some judicious poking. They had rather more holes than would be needed for two legs and indeed a penis.

“Yes, they look a bit of mess. Do you want to go and buy some more pairs?” she suggested.

“Yes, but I will need some money.” First hurdle covered.

“How much do you reckon?” She was looking in her purse. “Here’s £20, you should be able to get a few.”

I took the proffered note.

“I should be able to pop to the shops after school, I suppose.”

“That’s a good idea.”

So after school I made a small diversion into town and headed for Marks and Spencer. I looked first at the men’s section. I could see they were much as I had now and then moved on to the women’s aisle. Plenty more choice here, in all shapes and sizes. Still I didn’t have a great deal of money and they had some multiple packs of briefs quite cheap. I was able to afford 2 packs of 8. Normally, I would have been embarrassed by this sort of mission, but today it was providing relief to my anxiety.

When I arrived home, I went straight to my room with my purchases and came down to the living room to present the 2p change.

“Well what did you get?” my mother asked, with slight curiosity.

“Oh, I’ve left them upstairs.”

“Well, it’s my money so I would like to look.”

I soon returned to show her and naturally she was a little surprised. She was very matter-of-fact.

“It’s going to be hard to separate these from mine and Sally’s, and Barbara’s when she’s home.” I was impressed with her sangfroid. I wished that I had the same skill.

“I know. Perhaps I should put on some labels,” I suggested coolly.

“Why?” she asked, looking straight at me.

I gulped. I suppose I had to answer, fortunately there was just the two of us. “Here goes,” I thought.

“I don’t know exactly. I have been having these odd feelings. I just can’t wear my old pants. Something in me is unsettled by it. It’s like an inner voice, though not a voice and I just couldn’t feel happy in my pants. It’s like I need to not wear men’s, but to replace them with women’s. It’s like a command which I have to obey. It sounds just as odd to me as it must to you.” Whereupon I started to sob.

Now, no mother can take that, least of all in her son. She enveloped me in her arms on the sofa. I sobbed gently through my recent experiences, to explain what was going on in my mind.

“Oh, Michael. I don’t really understand, but it’s not a big deal.”

I immediately felt relieved.

“You won’t tell Dad and Sally, will you?” I asked, plaintively.

“Your father will never know,” she harrumphed, “and your sister won’t care. It’s only a small peccadillo.” I had no idea what that was.

I took my packages back to my room, relieved, and unpacked their contents. Sixteen pairs of briefs in plain colours – blue, black, pink and white – two of each in each pack. I made space for them and rejected my old pairs. I was going to chuck them in the dustbin, but I thought I better hang on to them for now.

Mum came up to see me with an indelible marker and put M on all the briefs next to the label, so she could tell them from the other females of the family. She gave me another hug and a smile before leaving. I was left to thinking about this turn of events. Would this knicker fiasco be unique? Was I going bonkers? Anyway, for the time being I just felt fine.

Of course, it wasn't all that was happening, I had started to look at my room anew but if you had asked me then, I wouldn't have been able to tell you why. I had lots of posters up in my room; cars, heavy metal bands and football teams. I was gradually replacing them; where there had been a poster of Arsenal, there was now a scene with horses running across an open plain. Where there had been cars, there was a model wearing some current fashion – not much to be honest. Where there had been a heavy metal band, there was now a girl group. It is the sort of thing you would expect of a 15-year old, so nothing untoward, but looking back now it would seem quite abrupt. The strangest for me was the ballerina who appeared, but I had just loved it when I saw it in the shop. Finally, there was a picture of a knife thrower, throwing at a girl tied to a target. She again was somewhat scantily clad. Read what you like into the psychology of that!

The whole atmosphere of my room had changed from smelly grot to light and airy. Well, anyone has to grow up I guess and now was my time.

My sister Sally often came to my room now, whereas before she was distinctly persona non grata. She used to sit on the bed and tell me what she had

been doing. She did horse riding and netball, while I had been doing athletics, and it was interesting to hear about it from her. I had been unable as yet to do the athletics, due to recuperation from my illness, so I liked the sound of horse riding.

I appealed to my parents to take me along for a try-out.

“You can take the money from my allowance, if I like it,” I pleaded.

After some coaxing, they agreed; they had no real choice on fairness grounds, the one thing that obsesses all children.

Come Saturday morning my mother was trying to equip me.

“Sally has all this stuff already – hat, jodhpurs, boots, crop – I can lend you some for now and if it works out, you can save up of your own.”

The clothes she had in mind were old ones of Barbara, but they more or less fit me. The jodhpurs were tight in all the right places and the boots finished me off. They were about a size 8. The helmet was one she had used and was now a bit out of date, but it would do.

I looked the part of a teenager – a teenage girl – going for a riding lesson. No one was mentioning that in case I was upset by it.

The class was great fun for a newbie like me. The woman who ran it, Clare, was delighted to have a new customer, particularly a lad. She had a suitable horse (it might have been a pony) and helped me mount. I fell off quite quickly but with a few trials I literally got to grips with what I was supposed to do. She then led me round the yard, a hay-strewn area of the farm, and took me through to the field where instruction was to occur.

It turned out that I was a natural, or was she just being encouraging? The morning went in no time at all and Sally and I were soon running home comparing notes of what we had been up to.

On Tuesday after school I went back to my athletics group, as I felt that my illness was now gone. I had been a keen sprinter with some excellent times and I wanted to be back on the track. As I approached the athletics hut, I was building with excitement, buzzing with the prospect of some return to proper fitness. It was quite a dull evening and the dampness from the rain of the afternoon gave quite a pleasant atmosphere. Everything seemed set for a perfect hour.

I greeted the coach, Simon, a solid man who I suppose was in his early forties. He had been a county sprinter and clearly kept that up. He always said that because he hadn't reached the top, he was very keen for us to do so. I had always been one of his proteges, although I am not sure I was quite as enthusiastic for me as he was.

By the time we were ready to go there was about ten of us, all of a similar age – 15 to 17 – on Tuesdays and everyone was clearly pleased to see me back.

The first part was warmup and Simon had us jogging round the track for a few laps. In no time at all I was 100 yards adrift of the others and it was clear that I couldn't really cope. I pulled up at the equipment hut at the end of the third lap. Simon came over.

“Hi Mike, I guess it might be a bit too soon for you yet. These illnesses take time to get over. You may be interested to know that Seb Coe had the same thing and he won gold medals at two Olympic Games.” He put an arm across my shoulder.

“Who's Seb Coe?” I asked.

“You’re kidding me.” He looked worried. I laughed.

“Yes, even I have heard of him,” I went on, “Do you mean I’ll win a Gold Medal now I have had Toxo?”

“Well, if you try hard.”

But I didn’t, my enthusiasm had been killed off and I never returned to what had been my favourite activity.

So that left a gap in my social life and for the time being, after I had finished my homework for school, I spent my time reading. I had soon consumed all the titles my sisters had to offer and needed to develop further. I realise this will sound very creepy, but I went to see my English teacher about it.

Ms. James was a woman in her late twenties. In the past, I had hated her lessons, but now in my new sedentary state, I had learned quite a lot about her subject.

“Well, I’m pleased you want to put some effort in at last, Michael. The books you are supposed to have read are Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights by the Bronte sisters, for a start. From the European Group, “A day in the life of Ivan Denisovich” and you can certainly read more of Solzhenitsyn. Then you can look at some of the French things on our list. Or Gabriel Garcia Marques might suit you. Have you read Philip Pulman at all; actually, you might enjoy him. We used to have “To Kill a Mocking Bird” – one of the best books ever. Some children get to read “Catcher in the Rye”.

“Thank you,” was all I managed as I was engulfed by the flow of suggestions.

“Better to be converted before its too late, I guess”, she smiled. “I don’t know what’s got into you, Michael. You will be my star performer, if you carry on

in this way.” She was almost gushing with enthusiasm.

I spent a lot of time with my nose in a book and that had a knock-on effect on my school work, which was much improved. Despite my three-week absence I was heading to the top, except in sports where I was still too slow and, in my view, feeble. I was also happy to keep out of games that needed the changing rooms, as I didn’t want the other lads to see my girly knickers.

This issue continued as I had a try out with my old pants and the same panic was reignited – I virtually tore them off. The voice commanded me, it sounded furious that I needed to be told again. Odd or what? My inner voice started to nag at me in other respects – unhappy with my socks, trousers and shoes – nothing quite so acute as the pants but unsettling nonetheless.

It was at that time that my mother had a pile of clothes to get rid of, mostly Barbara’s discards. She left them in the upstairs corridor. I couldn’t help having a root through and came across a yellow short-sleeved woollen top. I knew I had to try it on. I took it back to my room and just stroked it. It felt gorgeous.

I slipped my shirt off and pulled it over my head. The feeling against my skin was wonderful. I knew I couldn’t let it go for the jumble sale. I spent five minutes just enjoying the sensation and looking at myself in the mirror. It felt so calming. I then wondered if there was anything else.

The voice within seemed to say, ”That’s better, Michael, that’s more you!”

Could I keep the jumper on and go and look or should I take it off first? The former was pleasurable, the latter a risk. I decided on the risk and went out for



a further search. I picked out some checked slacks that I had seen Barbara wear, they were a little dated, but she had worn them for a few years. I tucked them under my arm and returned to my room.

This time I needed to remove my trousers and put on the new ones. I pulled them on and then discovered that they had a zip on the side. Not something I was accustomed to. It gave a really flat front, just a slight bump over my penis. They felt good with the yellow top and I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes, taking deep breaths of pleasure. When I opened them, there was Sally.

“Why are you wearing Barbara’s old clothes?” she asked quietly.

I could hardly tell her the truth that I had felt almost compelled to put them on. It made little sense to me and I couldn’t see it being easier for her to grasp. I knew that I was a bright red.

“I just thought that I would like to. What do you think? Do they suit me?” Was that cool enough? I wondered.

“Well, they do, I suppose,” she laughed. “But boys don’t usually put on their sisters clothes, I think.”

“No. I don’t really want to but something inside me tells me to do it.”

“Oh, have you done it before?” she queried.

“Not exactly, apart from the riding gear.” I was getting deep.

She waited for a further reply, with a cocked eyebrow.

“I wear girl’s knickers.” There, I was out.

“You’re going to have to show me this!”