

May Queen



Charlotte Mayo



A "Young Adult TV" Novel

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Preface

She sits in the restaurant with her boyfriend – she’s nineteen years old, she has fine, long blond hair and a slim figure. She is quite tall. Her dark-haired, muscular boyfriend is attentive – he is smartly dressed in white shirt and casual, grey trousers. He drinks a pint of beer whilst the woman he is with drinks a cocktail. It’s her birthday and when they arrived at the small, family-run Italian restaurant, a balloon with “Happy Birthday” written on it was tied to the table. She wears a thin, white jumper and tight blue jeans which cling to her curvaceous figure. She’s also wearing a pair of brown, knee-high boots with a high-heel - they are a birthday present from her Mum and she is wearing them for the first time. She is laughing and she is happy but sometimes she wonders how she got to this point, she wonders what happened in her life to cause such a change. Her boyfriend, Patrick, starts to reminisce. She knows he wants to tell her something, he has been building up to it for ages. He takes a gulp of his beer and he starts to talk.

“Do you remember the Mock-a-Weasel pageant when you were the May Queen?” he says.

She laughs, sips her drink, pushing the pink umbrella out of the way as she does so. “God, Patrick, how could I ever forget it? It was a life changer!”

“I know! It’s funny how it all worked out,” he says.

It was funny, really funny – unbelievable really...

MAY QUEEN

by Charlotte Mayo

Chapter One

Jack had known that something was wrong. It was all the sniggering, the other pupils hiding their mouths behind their hands and talking about him as if he wasn't there. It was like he smelt or something or he had grown two horns and everyone was scared to tell him. Instead they laughed at him. Behind his back. The looks. The glances. Jack had known he was not the most popular boy in the school – far from it - but he could not understand this sudden unwanted attention – and it wasn't just kids in his class or year, which he could have kinda coped with, it was everyone – the whole school – kids that didn't know him. Even some of the teachers looked at him funny.

Jack was a shy, awkward, skinny kid who lacked social awareness. He had few friends. But, apart from the odd kick from the occasional bully, he was pretty much left alone. Until now. Now he seemed to the

centre of everyone's attention. It was 1986 and he was twelve years old, he was at a small secondary school and he couldn't be doing with it. It was really doing his head in. He wasn't the cleverest kid in the school but neither was he the dumbest – in fact, he was a pretty average school boy workwise so there was no reason for him to be marked out but marked out he was. He lived alone with his mother who was divorced. She was a timid lady who had taken her husband leaving her very hard. Now she didn't go out. She stayed at home and watched soap operas on TV. She didn't do much housework – in fact she didn't much of anything apart from go to work in an office - she lacked motivation. She didn't have many friends and Jack didn't have many friends either. End of. But something was going on and Jack didn't have a clue what it was. Something was wrong. He knew that. In a small village it was hard to keep secrets but a secret was being kept from Jack – he deduced that much.

It had all started with the village's annual Mock-a-Weasel May Day pageant. The Mock-a-Weasel pageant dated back hundreds of years – some said to the days of the Roundheads (who were also called the Parliamentarians) and Cavaliers (who were also called the Royalists) when England was mired in a brutal Civil War – that had been between 1642 and 1646. There were others who said it went back even further to Pagan times – but the truth was that no doubt many threads of the past had been interwoven to form the village's current festival; however, one thing was sure, the little village of Coddington-on-the-Water took the pageant very seri-

ously. Very seriously indeed. It was the village's main annual community event and everyone participated. It was a one-day bonanza and people travelled from far and wide. Indeed, The Royal Oak public house, which sat in the middle of the green, had special dispensation to serve alcohol from morning to night or dawn to dusk as the old parchment read (this was by order of a charter from Charles II) and all the shops closed as villagers and visitors lined the streets to watch the centre piece of the Mock-a-Weasel celebrations – the pageant possession. The pageant included floats, bands, jugglers, the straw man and Morris Dancers and ended by the royal oak tree, close to the pub of the same name – the tree that had, rumour had it, been the saviour of Charles II who had hidden up it whilst the Roundheads had searched for him after the Battle of Worcester – the tree being one of many such tress which were given over to such a legend across the country. However, it was the means of eventual escape by Scotland's Young Pretender - Bonnie Prince Charlie from the English after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 which was to cause Jack Screen so many problems exactly 240 years later in 1986.

The secondary school was very small and just outside the village but like all those in Coddington-on-the-Water, the pageant was a deadly serious event which resulted in weeks of practicing: cakes were baked, crepe streamers made, costumes were sown – a brass band performed and girls and boys would engage in country dancing practice – but pride of place would be the May King and Queen who would be elected by the school pupils and would travel through the streets of Coddington-on-the-Water at precisely midday on the day of the Pageant. The May Queen would sit atop of one of the white, ribbon

festooned floats with her attendants and the May King on the one behind. Finally, once the long procession had ended at The Royal Oak pub they would be brought together and take their places on makeshift thrones that sat under the oak tree where they would be the focus of the Mock-a-Weasel celebrations; whilst the villagers sang and raised a glass or two to the youth who would continue “forever” the Mock-a-Weasel pageant. The festival, like many such May Day parades, was linked to Pagan rituals around fertility and new beginnings. The secondary school had the customary award of providing the King and Queen for the pageant and always set about its role diligently by allowing the pupils at the school to vote on who should undertake both roles.

Yet something had changed. Something was wrong and Jack knew it but he just didn’t know what and no one would tell him. It had started when the cardboard boxes, wrapped in brown paper, had been placed on the desks of every classroom. The ballot boxes had a slit in the top and each class teacher would duly hand out a ballot paper which was kept in a locked drawer and which simply asked:

MY CHOICE FOR MAY QUEEN IS

MY CHOICE FOR MAY KING IS

The teacher would hand over the ballot paper, tick the child’s name off the list and the child would answer the questions above and place the folded paper in the ballot box all in front of the teacher’s eyes – no child, once given a ballot paper, could leave the room until it was safely placed in the box for fear of:

Plagiarism

The ballot paper being photocopied.

Experience had taught the school that children were prone to cheat and would go to great lengths to get themselves or friends elected or to play some trick on the school resulting in an unpopular (with the teachers) appointment.

There were subsidiary roles too – ladies in waiting and King’s attendants but these would be selected after the main event by the drama teacher – depending how many volunteers there were who wished to take place in the parade for it was getting harder to find children who wanted to stand or sit on the floats and wave. But the main event was the election of the May Queen and King and this always proved popular as the winners knew their popularity was secure within the school for the two names with the most votes selected, from the entire school population. The school was small and everyone knew each other – even so the winners were usually older pupils who were well known in the school and who had the courage to canvass other, younger and more impressionable pupils or perhaps bribe them with helps of homework, football cards, sweets or other such niceties. The Headmaster had the final veto and one year had removed a particularly naughty boy from his role as King – the second choice was duly crowned but, being a democratic, he did not like to stand in the way of the pupil’s vote. In fact, there had been such an uproar when he had removed Giles – the naughty lad – from his role – he had vowed that he would never again interfere in a free and fair election. As an aged History teacher, who was close to retirement, in the staff room had coolly reminded the Headmaster:

“Acting like an autocrat and replacing Giles with Perkins, just because Giles doesn’t behave in school, doesn’t set a good example to the pupils who have duly elected him without fear or favour. The path of democracy must travel where it must travel without interference or influence by those who may assume to know better. The road to dictatorship starts with the repression of free and fair elections.”

There had been many nods of agreement by other members of staff in the staff room when the History teacher had made this little speech and so the Headmaster - a kindly man with a humourless disposition - had felt himself duly admonished. So, inadvertently a child who had left school prior to Jack’s arrival and whom Jack had never met was, like Bonnie Prince Charlie, The Young Pretender who had led the Jacobians against the hated English and then escaped to France via the Isle of Skye, to add to Jack’s woes.

But all Jack saw was the sniggering, the secrecy that went on when the ballots were completed and the smiles and laughter when pupils walked away from the cardboard boxes. Never had democracy been such a joyful experience. Jack voted for a girl he liked and blushed and stammered around called Celia and a boy who had befriended him once from some bullies, but other than that he took little interest. If truth be told, he hated the pageant, he hated the Mock-a-Weasel Festivities and he couldn’t wait to leave, the small-minded Coddington-on-Water and escape somewhere else. He was not sure where but he was sure there was a better life waiting for him outside the village and he was determined to find it.

The voting went on for two weeks to allow every pupil the chance to vote and when all the names were ticked off the boxes were taken to the sports hall and one afternoon after school, volunteers duly counted the ballot papers and discarded the many spoilt ballot papers – as pupils felt “obliged” to vote, some made sure their votes would not count.

MY CHOICE FOR MAY QUEEN IS Danger Mouse

MY CHOICE FOR MAY KING IS Donald Duck

At last the votes were counted and during an assembly one day, the Headteacher was handed a gold envelope with the names of the winners written on a piece of paper inside. He did not know who had won, so rather like an announcer at The Oscars, he removed the paper, placed his reading glasses on his nose and read out the results.

He announced the winner of the King first – it was to be Patrick “The King” McLoughlin – a sixteen old who was popular in the school – in fact, he was so popular he already bore the nickname “The King,” His anointment to the throne was far from a surprise to anyone. Then the Head pushed up the paper ready to announce the winner of the May Queen. He looked at the piece of paper in his hand and his hand started to shake, he raised his eyebrows – he took off his reading glass, wiped them and placed them back on his nose as if this gesture would clear the name and replace it with another. It didn’t work so he showed the paper to his deputy who sat behind him on the stage. His deputy nodded. Meanwhile a light, low titter had started to affect the students like a contagion – the pupils seemed to know that something momentous was just about to happen. The laughter became louder so the Headmaster coughed forcefully.

Someone called out, “Get on with it, Sir! We’ve not got all day!”

Normally such insubordination would have met with a detention but the Headmaster was so transfixed by the paper in front of him he said nothing.

There was a collective, sharp intake of breath – the Head’s hand shook as he read out the name on the piece of paper. The May Queen, with 75% of the votes, was to be none other than Jack Screen – *a boy!*

Chapter Two

There was a mixture of applause, laughter and cheering – the Head had to raise his hands and try to dampen down the assembly. Whilst all the others laughed, Jack hung his head, blushing to the roots of his blond hair. He could not understand it. He felt like crying. A youth behind him stabbed him in the back, then another pushed him in the shoulder.

“It’s you, Jack, you’re the May Queen!”

Jack wanted to go home, he felt hot and angry. Why had they done this to him? How had this happened? He couldn’t understand it. Soon the teasing started.

“Jack Screen, Jack Screen is the May Queen.”

They shouted at him in the playground during break. Everyone did it. Not just his form or his year group but *everyone* in the whole school. Everyone did it. They all mocked him. Jack told his mother but she was of little help.

“Well, surely it’s a good thing,” she said. “It means you’re popular in the school and they think you’d make a good May Queen.”

Jack walked off to his bedroom, slamming doors. His mother was so thick and ignorant she didn’t understand that it was a practical joke that the school had played on the teachers. Sometimes, when he was really riled, he would say to his mum:

“No wonder Dad left you!” That always opened the flood gates – she blamed herself for his father’s departure from the family home with a woman ten years his junior and any reminder sent her into the depths of misery. But this time he was too annoyed and upset to even say that. He sat on his bed deep in thought. He didn’t know what to do. He wanted to run away but where to? He had no friends nor money and nowhere to go. He was stuck. All he could hope was that the school would quickly give the role to Janice, who had come second, and he would be forgotten (although not announced in assembly, the runner up was always informed that they would need to be ready to stand in if illness or other circumstances meant the May King and/or Queen could not undertake their roles and Janice had already approached Jack in the hope he would give up his invisible crown – but Jack knew it was not as easy as that and he would need a reason to resign.)

The teasing didn’t abate however and every day at school was an ordeal for Jack. After one lesson, his form teacher, Mrs. Stillings, asked to speak to him. When the rest of the class had left the room, she took him to one side and had a quiet word in his ear.

“Now Jack, do you want to be the May Queen?”

“No, of course not!” Jack protested. “It’s a stupid, stupid prank and I’m the butt of it. All the kids have ganged up on me and voted for me and it’s not fair. I don’t want to be the stupid May Queen. I want no part in the stupid Mock-a-Weasel Festival.”

“OK, OK,” Mrs. Stillings said as she tried to calm Jack down. She smiled for she had never seen Jack annoyed before. Still she felt sympathetic to Jack’s plight – she knew it must be hard to be named in the assembly as the May Queen and have the unwanted attention of the whole school thrust upon you. She told him that she would try to get the verdict overturned. Later in the week, during one lunchtime, she paid the Headteacher a visit. She explained that she had spoken to Jack and he didn’t want to be the May Queen and he was really upset by the teasing that had gone on since his name had been announced in the assembly. Was there anyway the role could not quietly be given to the runner up, Janice?

“We can only do it if Jack or his mother agrees,” the Headteacher said.

“Well, Jack doesn’t want to be the May Queen!” his class teacher protested.

The Headteacher said, “That’s as may be but I think it’s the mother who needs to be the one that says she doesn’t want Jack to be the May Queen. Then we can give the role to Janice McDuff who finished second. I feel there is some conspiracy to shame the school but what can we do?”

“Well, I’ll speak to his mother and see what her view is on the matter and if she wants the result overturned, I think we’ll be able to move forward and appoint Janice to the role. I know she’s still keen – I

teach her History and I had a quiet word with her. Then you can announce in the assembly that Janice has replaced Jack.”

“Yes, you do that,” the Headteacher said disinterestedly. He was trying to eat his meal and read the paper - the whole May King and Queen business was a headache he felt he could do without. Why couldn't students just be sensible and vote for a boy to be May King and a girl for May Queen? It was hardly rocket science!

A few days later Mrs. Stillings asked Jack's mother, Carol Screen, to come in for a meeting. She was a nervous, timid lady with sparrow features whose husband had left her for another, younger woman. She had never recovered nor forgiven him but most of all she blamed herself for being a “bad” wife and mother and felt that everything was always her fault. Tragically for Jack, by the time of the meeting (Mrs. Screen had cancelled on three occasions as she had felt too nervous to come to school and talk to Mrs. Stillings in case she was told off), Mrs. Stillings had had a change of heart brought about by a class discussion on England's relationship with Scotland and the Jacobite revolt of 1745.

“Miss,” one of the girls said. “If you remember, the Scottish Prince, The Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie escaped the English in 1746 by dressing as a woman and was smuggled to the Isle of Skye by Flora MacDonald who arranged for him to be taken to France. Wouldn't it be great to re-enact that?”

Others agreed.

“The Mock-a-Weasel Pageant has come down from Charles II, so it's around that period,” someone said.

“Yes, Miss, we’ll be returning to the true spirit of the Mock-a-Weasel festival – it all started with Charles II who hid in an oak tree to escape the Roundheads after the Battle of Worcester and the Jacobite revolts started with his successor, James II – Britain’s last Catholic monarch who was deposed by the Glorious Revolution of 1688 which brought the Protestants William and Mary to the throne.”

Mrs. Stillings was very impressed by her charges’ recall of important historical events in the history of England and Scotland. It surprised her that they had learnt so much from her History lessons and were so keen to reference past events to the Mock-a-Weasel Festival. She was thoughtful. There was something in what the girls said that gave her a justification with continuing the idea of Jack becoming the May Queen. For wasn’t she a little keen on the idea herself? Once she had started to give it some thought, she actually found herself with a growing inclination to keep the status quo in terms of the vote – for was there not a part of her that wanted to see Jack humiliated? She didn’t like Jack, she was not sure why, there was something about him that just didn’t gel with her and this was a chance to humiliate him. Also, wasn’t it sexist that it was always the girls that were expected to dress up and look pretty? This was a point one of the girls who said:

“Why not let Jack be the May Queen? Why should it always be the girls that look pretty and glamorous and feminine? Why can’t the boys also see what it is like to be judged by appearance and conform to male gender stereotypes.”

The girls applauded. The boys looked sheepish. After the initial teasing, Jack had found some sympa-

thy with the boys; they felt sorry for him, they didn't know how it happened. Well, they did – some of the older girls had been the ringleaders and they had all been told to vote for Jack as it would be a “laugh” but not many of the boys were laughing now. It was clear that the girls in the class seemed to like the idea that Jack would become May Queen and it had led to discussions about gender bias and gender politics. Mrs. Stillings much preferred girls to boys and the idea that they saw her as one of their number -fighting for gender equality - pleased her immensely – which, when added to the fact the girls (more so than the boys) had actually been paying attention to her History lessons, meant she was starting to be swayed by her female pupils into thinking it was no bad thing if Jack was the May Queen. Mrs. Stillings started to ruminate on the question of whether Jack should be crowned May Queen. She discussed it with her husband.

“Well, if he got the most votes and that's who the school want, that's who the school should get. Perhaps it will stop the kids playing pranks like this in the future too if the school goes ahead with it and cedes to the pupils' wishes that Jack is the May Queen.”

That was another point – the pupils thought they were mocking the authority of the school by voting for Jack in the certain knowledge he would not be paraded through Coddington-on-the-Water as the May Queen, but what if the school did follow through and let Jack become the May Queen? That would be an important demonstration to the children that actions have consequences and you can't always predict what those consequences will be. However, in the back of her mind was the conversation with the

Headteacher. She knew if Mrs. Screen protested, they would have to back down and just accept that Janice should take on the role.

At first, Mrs. Stillings had thought it would not be possible to make Jack the May Queen as the protest from Jack and his Mum would be too great but, in the event, the protest was muted. It was muted from Jack because he was too shy and Mrs. Screen, when Mrs. Stillings finally met with her, after the annoying cancelled appointments, was too scared of authority.

So it was that when Mrs. Stillings finally held her meeting with Mrs. Screen to try to persuade her to mount a protest about Jack being nominated as the May Queen, she did exactly the opposite. She found herself persuading Mrs. Screen of the merits of the idea. Mrs. Screen, with her dirty Mac and lank black hair, was too timid to question it. If the teacher thought it was a good idea then, as far as she was concerned, it was a good idea.

“Whatever you think is best,” Mrs. Screen said. “I know my Jack isn’t keen on it but if the school think it will do him good, I am all for it and I will go along with it and help where I can.”

Oh, how naive the woman was! Mrs. Stillings thought. How easily persuaded!

Mrs. Stillings pressed home her advantage.

“It will help him develop his self-confidence and bring him out of himself,” she told Mrs. Screen. In fact, she thought the opposite was more likely to be the case.

Mrs. Screen reluctantly agreed.

“Well, it just shows that he is very, very popular,” she said with an innocence that was almost laughable.

“No, Love,” Mrs. Stillings wanted to say, “he has been set up. The years above were playing a joke and they picked on Jack as he is the most unpopular boy in the school and the quietest.”

Mrs. Stillings reported back to the Headmaster that the meeting had not been a success. The Headteacher cursed with frustration – why was it no one could do anything properly? He phoned Mrs. Screen and demanded she come in for a meeting. Mrs. Screen, felt by the Headmaster’s tone that she was going to get told off, so when she knocked nervously on his door, she was prepared to apologise for anything she or Jack had done wrong and agree to anything. Unfortunately, Mrs. Screen was not that clever and although the Headteacher explained that he could not tell her what to do, she would not get the hint that she needed to inform the school, in no uncertain terms, that she did not want Jack to be the May Queen. Then, perhaps he could act! To the utter exasperation of the Headteacher, Mrs. Screen repeated back parrot fashion the phrases Mrs. Stillings had used about “self-confidence” and “bringing him out of himself” – she was convinced the school wanted Jack to be the May Queen and could not pick up on the subtleties in the Headteacher’s speech which was informing her that if she put her foot down (something she had never done in her whole life) and demanded that Jack was replaced by a real girl, the school would have to act. Mrs. Screen had never demanded anything in her life and was not about to start.

The Headteacher was extremely frustrated but what could he do? Knowing the criticism he'd received when he had vetoed Giles, he didn't want to remove Jack from the role unless there was a very strong protest from Mrs. Screen. If not, he would do nothing, he could do nothing: Mrs. Screen seemed to naively think that crowds of people watching her son being paraded through the village dressed as a girl was a good thing! When she left the room, he put his head in his hands – the whole school was going to suffer a monumental embarrassment and he seemed powerless to do anything about it.

Chapter Three

The practicalities – that was the issue. How to make Jack into a May Queen? That was the big question on the organisers of the Mock-a-Weasel Pageant – at least from the school side. After the vote there was a lull as no one seemed to want to take on the role of transforming Jack – or was even sure if it would really happen. Then a girl in Jack's class, Angelica, approached Mrs. Stilling's.

“Miss,” she said one day. “My mother's a dress-maker. I have told her all about Jack and she will make the dress for him.”

Mrs. Stillings smiled with relief and pleasure. It had gnawed at her, this thought of how to transform Jack, now the answer to her dilemma was delivered to her on a platter. She arranged to make a visit to Angelica's home; she wanted to ensure that her mother was really on board with making the dress and to ensure her that the school would fund any expenses from their Mock-a-Weasel budget. So one day she took Angelica home in her small Fiat and dis-

cussed the prospect of making a dress for Jack for the pageant with her mother. To her surprise and delight, Angelica's Mum was totally unfazed by the idea. She showed Mrs. Stillings some examples of her work which impressed Mrs. Stillings no end – she was convinced she was dealing with a first-class seamstress.

“And to make a dress for a boy?” she asked. “You can do that?”

“Of course I can! It just means adding some padding into the lining of the dress to give a feminine shape,” Angelica's mother said.

“Well, it's fantastic that you have volunteered to do this for the Mock-a-Weasel Pageant and we can finally make Jack into a beautiful May Queen.”

So, satisfied that she had found a dress maker Mrs. Stillings spoke to Jack.

“Jack, come to see me after the lesson.”

The teasing and the taunts of “Jack Screen, the May Queen” had receded and with it, Jack hoped, any thought that he was going to be dressed as a girl and made to sit on top of a float as he was paraded through the village. Jack had been down-hearted since the vote, it seemed that nothing would go right for him. Everything seemed to be against him, he could not understand why the other children had ganged up on him to vote for him to be the May Queen. He was glad it had all gone quiet – he hoped it had been forgotten – they had quietly given the role to Janice and not told him – but it was the lull before the storm. Secretly, Jack knew that – the school always prepared early for the Mock-a-Weasel festival

and he knew his days were numbered. After the lesson, Jack went to see Mrs. Stillings. She sat at her desk, he stood by her side, hoping against hope she had sorted everything out and he would not have to be the May Queen.

“Now, Jack, how are we going to transform you into a May Queen?”

Jack’s heart sank, he felt tears in his eyes, he shrugged his shoulders and said he didn’t know. He reiterated that he didn’t want to be the May Queen but, like his mother who felt that their father’s leaving was her fault, Jack felt that it was somehow his fault that he had been voted May Queen and he should just accept what destiny had in store for him passively.

“Well, fortunately Angelica’s mother is a dress maker and she has agreed to make you a dress. Come to see me at lunchtime in your P.E. kit – you have P.E. today, don’t you?”

Jack nodded.

That lunchtime, whilst the other children went out to break, he got changed again and went to see Mrs. Stillings. She stood ready with a tape measure.

“It won’t take long and then you can get changed back into your school uniform and go out to the playground.”

So it was that Jack was measured: height, waist, chest, arms. When the children came back after lunch, she handed a piece of paper with the measurements written upon it to Angelica along with some money from the school fund.

“You will have to buy some underwear; we will re-pay the cost of the dress and any additional expenses.”

“Thanks Miss,” Angelica said as she pocketed the money. My how she was going to enjoy transforming Jack - she had told all the girls in the class about her mother’s offer to Mrs. Stillings and they were already designing dresses for Jack on the backs of exercise books.

The day after, Angelica approached Jack.

“Mum says you can come around on Saturday.” She passed Jack the address on a piece of paper. Jack had never in his life felt so downhearted. They really were going to make him look like a girl!

Mrs. Screen could not drive so, that Saturday, they took the bus to Angelica’s house.

“It is nice area,” Mrs. Screen kept saying as they sat on the top deck and looked at the suburban houses with their white walls, trim hedges and neat drives. It was a far cry from the ex-miner’s terrace house where Jack and his mother lived in the centre of Coddington-on-the-Water. Jack could not bring himself to look out the window so instead he just stared straight ahead; his head was in turmoil, he kept rubbing his hands, he held his mother’s sleeve, he wanted to say, he wanted to shout, he wanted to scream that he *could not do it, he could not do it, he could not do it*. But he said nothing. Nothing at all.

They disembarked at Woodruff Road and walked down the street of pleasant, tree lined street of white semi-detached houses until they found number 58. A three-bedroom house with a green garage and dou-

ble-glazed windows. Roses grew along the tidy drive which delivered a glorious scent into the air. The grass was neatly manicured.

Mrs. Screen pulled the pretentious bell chain and in seconds the door was opened.

“Oh, Mrs. Screen and her son Jack! How delightful to see you both!”

Angelica’s mother was young, blond and effervescent; she wore tight blue jeans and a baggy top. She radiated confidence. The house smelt clean and fresh and bright. Jack immediately liked her. He liked the house too – the house where he lived was cluttered, his mother could never make a decision to throw anything away so she collected things. She was a reluctant hoarder who collected junk because of her indecision. She would go to throw something away and then think that she might need it or something that was broken might miraculously repair itself. Had someone else cleared the house she would have accepted it – just as she accepted everything – including her husband’s affairs until the last one had resulted in the marriage killing words:

“I’m leaving you.”

“Oh why? I’m so sorry, it’s all my fault, I should have been a better wife,” had been Mrs. Screen’s response. “If you stay, I will try to make things better.”

It hadn’t worked.

When Jack asked her if he could help her tidy up, she just said:

“I might need it someday.” It was her constant refrain for one thing she didn’t like was the idea of Jack

taking the lead and clearing things up – somewhere in her mind she believed that she was the mother and in control and Jack, who was basically a “good kid,” was under her command although Mrs. Screen had never commanded anything in her life. Jack hated it, he wanted to live in a house like Angelica’s – he wanted to live in a house that was clean and fresh and bright. Soon Angelica was at her mother’s side. Angelica’s mother held out her hand.

“I’m Brenda... Brenda Hughes.”

Mrs. Screen apologetically took Brenda’s hand.

“I’m Carol Screen, Jack’s mum,” she laughed nervously as if embarrassed by her own name and by her son, Jack, who she thought was not quite good enough – but then he was a “Screen” so he wouldn’t be.

Angelica smiled at Jack and the smile never left her face. And it wasn’t a mocking smile. Not at all. It wasn’t a smile that said Jack was about to be humiliated and embarrassed. No, it was a comforting smile, a smile that said Jack was in safe hands. That he would enjoy whatever it was they had in store for him.

So, they entered the house – this clean, fresh bright house and went to the dining room where Brenda made them all drinks – squash for Jack and Angelina and tea for Carol Screen and herself.

“It’s so exciting,” Brenda said. “When Angelina came home from school and told me, I thought, well, that is a turn up for the book, so modern and forward thinking. A boy for the May Queen! You must be so proud. Jack is making history.”

They were not words Jack would have thought of – he could only think of different words. Already he was close to crying. He didn't want to do it. He really didn't. He didn't know why they had voted for him. He could not understand it. He just wanted to be left alone. He just wanted to read his Commando comics, stand at the edge of the playground and be left alone. He wanted no part of it. No part of the pageant.

Carol sat with her legs together, her teacup on her lap.

"I'm so proud of him being voted... well, it proves he's popular, don't it just?" she said.

Brenda continued. "You must be. I couldn't wait to offer to make the dress. I've never made a dress for a boy before; trousers and jackets of course, but never a dress."

So they sat and drunk their drinks and slowly Angelina and Jack started to talk. Shyly at first but slowly they made conversation – *what lessons do you like, who's your favourite teacher?* Jack had never really spoken to a girl before and it was all new to him but he enjoyed the experience. And then it happened.

"Right," said Brenda, rubbing her denim clad knee. "We have the measurements – shall we see what we can do for you, Jack?"

Brenda took Jack to the room at the back of the house – Angelica and Carol followed closely behind.

"This is my sewing room," she said. Jack looked at the large table, the sewing machine, the fabrics, the rolls of thread. He was conscious of Angelica and his Mum behind him. "Do you want to strip down to your



underpants and I'll double check the measurements and then test out some fabrics and designs?"

Jack did as he was told. There seemed little choice in the matter. He was trapped. He went to a small, downstairs bathroom and took off his clothes and rested them on a chair. Dressed in his underpants, he came out and padded back to his mother, Brenda and Angelica. He felt self-conscious and he shivered, despite the warmth of the room. Brenda took a tape measure to him like a true professional, noting down the measurements on a small pad she'd attached to her wrist. Next she took long pieces of coloured fabric and held them against Jack, like a Roman of old unrolling a scroll.

"What do you think?" she asked her daughter and Carol.

They, or rather Angelina, gave an opinion. Carol just agreed with Angelina and Brenda. Red was too bright; crushed pink – possibly; green, no; white – possible; blue – a favourite. Then as to the style, Brenda showed some designs in a book and drawings she had made. Straight was the consensus – straight and simple – floor-length, sleeved – possibly puffed.

When they had decided on a material, Brenda started to pin fabric to Jack. He stood statuesque as the material was wrapped around him and pinned and cut into place. Brenda held a pin in her mouth, others were in the pin pad attached to her wrist. Like the work of a seasoned professional, the dress began to take shape out of the flat fabric.

"The sleeves come last," she said. She started to draw some sketches – there was a graph paper style A4 pad resting on her dressmaker's table. Jack could

see where Angelina got her artistic flair from for her mother was as skilled with a pencil as she was with pins and fabric.

When Jack was thoroughly pinned up and the fabric was in place, Brenda said:

“Right, I think that’s it for today. I need to buy some more material and work on it but we’ve made a good start and I’ve a good idea of what I need to do. Perhaps if you come back on Wednesday, I will have a mock-up of the dress made up. Also, we will buy some undergarments with the money the school gave us.”

Slowly, Brenda removed some of the pins and Jack was free to pad back to the bathroom and put his normal clothes back on. Whilst Jack was changing, Brenda placed the dress over a tailor’s dummy and, with Angelica’s help, she pinned material she had had to remove to release Jack back into place. When Jack returned, he looked at the dress on the dummy. It was hard to believe it had been on his body and that soon he would be wearing it or something very much like it.

“That was exciting,” Mrs. Screen said as they waited at a bus stop to take them home. “Did you enjoy it?”

Jack shrugged; no one seemed to take the fact that he was going to be transformed from a boy to a girl seriously! They all seemed to ignore that fact that he was the wrong gender and should not be wearing a dress! What was wrong with them all? Surely, they must all realise how humiliating it was for him? Jack just wanted to curl up in a ball and roll under a bush. He had had enough, he really had.