

Cupcake and Gender Boy

Uh-oh. When I got home from work I found three more messages from Mother on the answering machine; Brenda Ann was not amused. I'd moved into B.A.'s apartment about six weeks ago, and we thought Mother's calls might taper off as she got used to living alone, but they only seemed to be increasing, bless her heart.

"Ready to go to the fabric store? They close in—" Brenda Ann looked at her phone. "—forty minutes."

"I'd better call Mother," I said.

"You told me you'd help."

"I know," I said. Our friends Frank and Laura—well, Laura was sort of an ex-girlfriend—were having a Halloween party tomorrow evening after Trick or Treat and I'd promised to help B.A. with costume supplies. "But you know Mother. She'll want to talk."

"Call her from the car."

"She might need me to run over."

"I'm not waiting," B.A. said.

She left without me.

Message one: "Hello, Ed. It's your mother." She didn't know if she had enough candy for Beggars' Night and could I pick up a bag or two?

Message two: "Hello, Ed. It's your mother." Her porch light was out and could I fix it?

Message three: "Hello, Ed. It's your mother." She'd left a couple of messages earlier and did I get them?

“Hello, Mother. It’s Ed.” I told her I’d pick up some Milk Duds and drop by later.

“Can you bring Brendan?” I heard her ask. “She never comes over.”

“It’s ‘Brenda Ann,’ Mother,” I said. “She’s at the fabric store getting stuff for our costumes.”

“That’s right, she sews. You told me. You should marry her, Ed.”

“She won’t be home until later,” I said.

It only took me an hour to deliver the candy, replace the bulb, and finish a few other chores at Mother’s house—it’s barely a mile from B.A.’s apartment. My move from Mother’s to B.A.’s had been almost painless: Each trip just five minutes, but lots of them, and no real urgency to finish.

My dad, a city cop, died when I was fifteen. It was a stupid accident—like me. I came along late in my parents’ life, an only child, and Dad and I didn’t get along. He was the macho man, and I was the class clown—but he tried. He bought the city’s old animal control van to revamp as my first car—a cool idea for a guy who thinks he’s funny. But when he was grinding the rust out of the floorboards, fungus dust invaded his lungs and killed him.

He’d never even let Mom balance their checkbook, and she was lost without him. She mostly hid in her sewing room unless I coaxed her out to dinner or a craft show or a movie—anything to keep her connected to the world.

After high school I got a job at Josie’s Passion, a mail-order lingerie and apparel company, starting as an order clerk and working my way up to supervisor. Ninety percent of the employees are women, which suits me fine. I get along better with women.

In fact, I was out for drinks with some women from Josie's when I met B.A. She teased me about my harem and I gave her my standard line: "I help dress the models for five dollars an hour. It's not much, but it's all I can afford to pay." She remembered the gag from an old Woody Allen movie, but she laughed anyway.

Two months later I moved in with her. She's an Events Planning assistant at a downtown hotel—the job is great, but not the pay. Sometimes I wonder if she asked me to live with her mostly to share expenses. But that's okay. Mother keeps me so busy I don't need another fulltime girlfriend.

When I got back from Mother's, B.A. had her sewing supplies spread out on the kitchen table like surgeons' tools, along with some slinky dark fabric, a sheet of black felt, and a few fuzzy wires. I twisted a wire into a crude oval. "What's this?"

She snatched it out of my hands. "And how was Dear Mother tonight?"

"She asked about you."

"Brendan, right?"

"Hey, she's old," I said. "Maybe you remind her of that actress, Brendan Fraser."

She stared at me. "Brendan Fraser is a man."

"No, that actress in *Journey to the Center of the Earth*."

"Mr. Brendan Fraser."

"No, remember? She went down to dinosaur-land with her nephew—"

"His nephew—"

“And they met that cute guide, who they both really liked, but she was too old for the nephew and too straight for Brendan—who’s pretty damn ugly for an actress, anyway, let’s face it.”

“But he’s . . . wait. So I look like an ugly actress?”

“No. I mean, you’re like an *attractive* Brendan Fraser. With cuter boobs.”

She yowled and came at me with claws unsheathed, predator on prey, but I was ready. We fell into the living room and rolled on the floor and just when I had her laughing and her halter nearly unhooked, she shook her head and pushed me away.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“Aw, Brendan.”

“Ed, you are weird and you take things too far.” She went back into the kitchen adjusting her clothes. “And you have gender issues.”

“Sorry.” I sat down next to her. “I guess I always *have* felt . . . maybe not exactly like a woman trapped in the body of a man, but more like . . .”

She looked sideways at me. “Like what?”

“Well, like a man trapped in the body of a woman who is, herself, trapped in the body of a man.”

“Sounds confusing.”

“Actually, it works out pretty well,” I said. “All the naughty bits are already in the right places.”

I thought I was a riot but I guess B.A. didn’t. “Go away. I need to sew these.”

“What are they?”

“Cats,” she said. “Here. This is for the ears. I’ll sew them on a skullcap made out of this. And these will be whiskers. Black slacks and tops, and we’re done.”

“You’re kidding.”

She smiled a feline smile. “Cats can be very sexy, Ed,” she purred. “Anyway, if you don’t like it, you should have gone with me like you promised.”

“I’m not wearing that. I’ll look ridiculous.”

“At this point you don’t get a vote, gender boy.” Her vanadium scissors slashed the black felt. “By the way, your share of the rent is due, and you owe me for half of this fabric.”

“Meow,” I said. “I’m not wearing that pussy outfit.”

She whirled on me with steel flashing and I almost fell out of my chair. Her eyes contracted to pinpoints. “We’ll see,” she said and patted my cheek.

The next day after work I delivered some papers to our main office in the old business district near the river. As I drove away I saw a slender woman—maybe a Josie’s sales rep—standing at the curb wearing a sexy ensemble from our business casual line. She met my gaze and waved me over.

The signal turned red. I stopped the car and lowered the passenger window.

“Thanks,” she said, leaning down. “You could use some company.”

“What? I thought you—”

“Give me a lift, will you? These shoes . . .” She popped the door and slid in.

“Wait, I’m not—”

“Green light,” she said.

“Okay, where can I drop you.” The flow of traffic eased me forward. “I thought you were somebody I knew.”

“You do now,” she said. “I’m Lectra. And I can give daddy what he can’t get at home.”

“That’s a great line. How does it work?”

“Give me fifty dollah—you one happy pappy.”

“No, I mean the Lectra pitch. How well does it work?” I stayed right to circle the block.

“Ain’t no brainteaser. For fifty bucks I do anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“You heard me, dad.”

I took a moment to look her over. “Wax my car?”

She shook her head and sat up a little straighter. “Sir,” she said, “Do you wish to pay me for sexual activity?” Her voice had changed—more diction in it.

“No,” I said.

“Wise choice. Drop me where you found me. I’m undercover for another half hour.”

“So,” I said. “My dad was a cop, too.”

“Retired?”

“Dead. An accident.” We were half a block from the drop-off point. “Can I ask you something, officer?”

“Sure.” She pointed to her cleavage. “Keep in mind we’re being monitored for quality assurance.”

“Do you believe what you said? Men go to prostitutes because they can’t get what they want at home?”

She looked out the window. “Some guys are just jerks. It’s a power thing.” Evening was falling and a streetlight cycled on. “Others just want some personal attention. Validation. I want to tell them, grow some nerve, sonny boy. Get a girlfriend. Let her know what you need. Don’t go out whoring. That’s just wrong.”

I pulled over. “Thanks, Lectra,” I said. “You’ve got a heart of gold.”

She got out and shot me a smile. “Stay out of trouble now.”

That smile. That hot outfit. As I drove off, a warm pulse urged me home to my woman. I tried B.A.’s cell but she didn’t pick up. So I headed for Mother’s to help her with Trick or Treat.

But Trick or Treat was a dud. After the first ten minutes, the street turned into a ghost town, and Mother sent me back to B.A. By the time I got to the apartment, she had already left for the party. I changed into black clothes and figured out the costume ears, whiskers, and cap thing. Yep, I looked stupid.

I wondered what Laura would be wearing. She and I almost had a thing once, and . . . it’s complicated. When I got to the party, I nearly broke my neck doing a double-take. There by the punch table was Earth’s most exquisite hooker. In the mellow jack-o-lantern light, her blood-red wig gleamed and tumbled over the black wickedness of her eyes, sweeping past lips flared with hellfire, caressing the proud décolletage, the barely-there dress.

And oh those boots.

“Laura,” I croaked. “Great costume.”

“Thanks.” She spun to give me the 3D effect. “Frank’s my pimp.” She gestured vaguely across the room.

“Let me look at the merchandise,” I said. She struck a pose or two and I ogled in awe. “You know, you’re not my first hooker tonight.”

“You’re a real tomcat, Ed,” she said. She stroked my whiskers and touched my face.

Mmm. Warm hands.

Frank and BA strolled over, Frank heavy with bling and wearing, inexplicably, a blue blazer with nautical buttons. B.A.’s outfit matched mine.

“Ed’s telling me I’m not his first hooker tonight,” Laura said.

“You’re not his second, either,” Frank said. His eyes held mine and he put an arm around Laura. “Pimp-Daddy’s got the option on these assets tonight.”

“So tell us about your other hooker, Ed,” B.A. said. Her whiskers twitched. She wouldn’t look at Laura.

“You look great, B.A.” I said. “Very sphinxy.”

“Thanks. That pussy outfit looks good on you, too. Now, about that hooker.”

“It’s a funny story, really,” I said. Well, the part about waxing my car made Laura laugh.

A sweet smoky aroma I’d noticed earlier grew more pungent. In a dim corner we saw a nun with a teardrop tattoo and a plastic crucifix toke on a crooked cigarette. She passed it to a heavy guy with a glossy bald head, hairy shoulders, and little pink nipples. He was naked except for his fuzzy slippers and a tri-fold diaper with one giant safety pin in front.

B.A. took my hand. “Can we go home, Ed?”

Laura hiked and adjusted her bosom, one side at a time. “You just got here.”

“Sorry,” B.A. said. “I promised to give Ed something special tonight if he wore his kitty costume, and I want to get it over with.”

I laughed. “No, you just can’t wait to get started.” I winked at Laura but B.A. pulled me into the autumn evening before I could see if she winked back.

“Thanks for getting me out gracefully,” I said. B.A. knew I had to leave before I got a contact high. Josie’s Passion had a random drug test that would rat you out for a poppy seed muffin. “Now tell me about this ‘something special.’ I think Frank and Laura were curious, too.”

“Screw them,” B.A. said. “Laura, showing off like that, and my god, that Frank with his preppy Pimp-Daddy posturing.” Her eyes were fierce. “Just let them wonder.”

I squeezed her hand and we split up to drive home.

The light was flashing on the answering machine again—just one message this time. “Hello, Ed. It’s your mother. Please call me when you get this.”

B.A. was de-cattin’ by the kitchen table. “Ed honey, don’t call her tonight, okay?”

“Don’t worry” I said. “She’ll still be up. It’s early.”

“Come help me out of this costume, Pussy-Puss,” she said.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Here, Eddie Eddie,” she sang.

“That’s even worse.”

“Aw, come on, Eddie-Puss.” She looked at me with carnivore eyes.

“And for god’s sake don’t call me Oedipus.”

She showed a flash of teeth. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“He didn’t know what he was doing.”

Her neck blotched with heat. “Ed, you motherfucker,” she articulated.

“Don’t get yourself too excited, B.A.,” I said. “You’ll get your blouse all milky.”

That made her laugh. “In your dreams, bottle-boy.”

“My wet dreams,” I said.

Her cheeks blazed; her eyes were wide and bright, the big black pupils holding my gaze without blinking.

“I’m calling Mother,” I said. “Something might have happened after I left tonight.”

B.A.’s expression didn’t change but she broke eye contact and turned away. I punched in Mother’s number from muscle memory while I enjoyed the view of B.A. prowling down the hall to our bedroom. Her back seemed a little stiff.

Mother and I chatted for a while—no emergency, she just wanted me to take her sewing machine in for its annual checkup next week—and then I tracked down B.A. She was in bed reading a book called *How to Sew Charming Place Settings*. But she still wore her black pants and blouse as if she could vanish into the night on little cat feet.

“Want to help me out of my cat costume, sweet pea?” I said.

“No.” She flipped a page.

“Want to play ‘Drown the Mouse’?”

“God no.” She flipped another page.

“‘Under the Bridge’?”

She ignored me.

I leaned over to kiss her, but she turned her head.

“Okay, what is it now,” I asked, straightening up.

“The same as always, Ed.” She closed her book. “Your mother.”

“What about her?”

“She’s always there. You’re either with her or en route. On the phone or trading messages. It’s like some weird love affair that I can’t compete with.”

“I—”

She held up her hand. “Tonight, for once, I specifically asked you not to call her. You know? Specifically.” She paused and seemed ready to cry but she didn’t. She took a shaky breath. “I’m nothing to you when your mother calls.”

We’d had this argument before. We would fight, get mad, and get over it. I loved B.A., in my own way, but did she love me? Or was I just an income source—her john? Maybe she was my third hooker of the day. Yeah, I could throw that in her face. But thinking of hookers reminded me of Officer Lectra’s advice. *Grow some nerve, sonny boy. Let her know what you need.*

“I’m not fighting tonight,” I said. “You’re right. I wasn’t hearing you. I’m sorry.”

“Right,” she said. “Drop the other shoe, Ed.”

“Okay. Here it is.” I sat on the bed and put my hand on her ankle. “You know what my vice is, B.A.? I love my mother and I feel an obligation to her. I cost her a husband.”

“How long are you going to blame yourself for that?”

“Don’t know.” I slid my hand to her knee. “But right now, that’s how I feel.” I took a breath and dove in. “Here’s what I need from you, B.A.”

“What *you* need? What about what *I* need?”

“Later.” I moved my hand to her thigh. “Right now I’m telling you what I need.”

She removed my hand from her leg. “I’m listening.”

“I can’t be torn between you and Mother anymore. I choose you both. Period. Now I need *you* to make a choice. Are you going to accept me, and love me? And maybe even help me deal with the mother thing? Or do you want to cut me loose and look for some perfect guy?”

She set her book on the nightstand. “I don’t know, Ed,” she said. “It’s a lot to accept.”

“Look, I’m not out drinking, or gambling, or snorting our rent money up my nose. You could have a man with a lot worse habits than changing his mother’s light bulbs, and trimming her bushes, and hauling her sewing machine to the repair shop, and putting up her inflatable—”

“Her sewing machine?”

“—Santa every year. . . What?”

“You never told me about that. What kind is it?”

“Oh. It’s a . . . some strange name. How do you say it?”

“Husqvarna?”

“No, that’s a motorcycle. Something like that poet you like. Sylvia Plath.”

She took a quick breath. “Oh. My. God. Not a Pfaff.”

“She keeps it pristine—it’s top-of-the-line. She splurged with the insurance money after Dad died, but her eyes aren’t—”

“Oh my god, Ed. Your mother has a top-of-the-line Pfaff?”

“With a silent P, right?”

“Eek! I’m calling her. Right now.” B.A. fanned herself with her hands. “Oh my god.”

“Did you just say ‘eek’?”

She grabbed her phone and bolted from the bedroom—so much for our heart-to-heart—but I picked up scraps of the conversation. Plackets, pleats, and buttonholes, and then something quick and quiet, and a laugh. Then B.A. burst into the bedroom in a flurry of fabrics and jangling keys.

“I’m running over to your mother’s for a while,” she said. “Don’t wait up.” She spun and dashed for the door.

“Wait. I can drive you.”

“No-no-no. Girls only tonight.”

“B.A., stop!” I didn’t raise my voice often but this was too much. “What the hell is going on?”

She paused in the doorway. “What do you mean, hon?” she said.

“Stop it, B.A. You said ‘eek.’ I heard you. You never say ‘eek.’ Now you’re all crazy about seeing my mother.” I stretched out on the bed. It was still warm where B.A. had been lying. “What’s this all about?”

She gave me an even look. “I’ll tell you if you want.”

“I want,” I said.

“Okay, there’s two things. One, your little speech about love. It got to me, Ed. Maybe I do love you. Maybe your devotion to your mother is something I should take comfort in. And maybe I admire the way you had the balls to put it out there, to admit you’ve got issues and ask for help. Maybe running over to your mother’s tonight is a little theatrical, sure, but it could be my way of telling you, okay, maybe I can try harder, do better, take an interest. Maybe things will work out.” She paused but she wasn’t finished. “But if you’re telling me I need to settle, to cave to what *you* want because you’re the best I can do—well, fuck that. But I’m going the other way first. I’m going to try it.”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

“Say something, Ed,” she said.

“B.A.,” I said. “You never talk like that. It’s scary.”

“You asked for it, lover-boy.”

“Okay. Okay. You said there were two things.”

She sauntered to the bed and sat. She put her hands on my chest and leaned down until her hair flowed across my face and her lips touched my ear. I closed my eyes. “Oh, sweetie,” she said. “My sweet baby. Are you sure you want to know?”

No, I thought.

“Yes,” I said.

Her breath warmed my skin. “You bad boy,” she whispered. “I cannot believe you never told me your mother had a Pfaff.” She sighed and I felt her tongue flick my earlobe. “I want to touch it. Smell it. Stroke it.” Her voice grew even quieter. “Just thinking about it is getting me wetter than you ever will.”

She sat up and I opened my eyes. Her expression was a riddle I couldn’t solve.

“You witch,” I said. I saw something glisten in her eyes and mine were burning a little too. “You sure I can’t come with you?”

“I’m sure. Don’t make a fuss and maybe Mr. Ed can come out and play later.”

“Hello, Wilbur!” I neighed happily, and then I was alone.

Twenty minutes later the phone rang. It was B.A.

“Your mother and I are trying out a few stitches and things. We’re going to have some wine and I’m going to spend the night.”

“I’m jealous.”

“I’m so happy to hear it,” she said. “You deserve it after drooling all over Laura tonight.”

Yikes. This woman!

She woke me with a kiss and said, “We’re here.”

Light streamed through the blinds and I squinted up at her. “What?”

“Your mother and me. We brought the Pfaff. She says we can keep it for a while, so I can learn to use it.” I rested my eyes for a second and when I opened them she was gone but I heard voices. I pulled on some sweatpants and went into the kitchen for coffee.

“Good morning, Ed,” Mother said. “Brenda Ann drove me over for brunch and we brought my sewing machine.”

“It’s Brenda Ann, Mother” I said. “Not Brendan.”

“I have never called her Brendan, Ed. You’re misunderstanding me. Or trying to make me look foolish.”

“You see what he’s like?” B.A. said.

“Yes, I know what he’s like and he’d better stop it right now.” The ice in her voice left me shivering.

“Oh my,” B.A. said.

“Yes, that’s a good one, isn’t it,” Mother said happily. “Have you used that voice on him yet?”

“No. But I’ll remember it.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” I said.

“And he keeps saying Brendan Fraser is a woman,” B.A. said. “He’s wrong about that, too.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to take sides, dear,” Mother said.

“There, you see what she’s like?” I said.

Mother laughed—a sound I hadn’t heard in a while. “Ed, please stop causing trouble,” she said. “Drink your coffee and start your day. Here. You can have the funny papers.”

We read in silence for a while.

“My my,” Mother said. “Brenda Ann, did you read about the prostitution arrests last night?”

B.A. lowered her paper. “What happened?”

“They arrested five men downtown, near the old stadium by the river. That’s close to where Ed works.”

“Josie’s has a building down there,” I said. “But I work in the order center. In the Industrial Park.”

“That’s right. I forgot.” She continued to read. “Oh my,” she said. “Listed to this.”

B.A. sipped her coffee.

“One of the men who picked up the undercover policewoman. He asked her to”—Mother shook her head—“to wax his car.”

B.A. coughed up a little coffee and dabbed her chin with a napkin. “Really?”

“What do you think that means?” Mother said. She closed her eyes. “Something kinky, I suppose.”

“Nothing I’ve ever tried,” B.A. said. She looked at me but I wouldn’t look back. “Not that I know of, anyway.”

Mother’s eyes flew open. “I just remembered,” she said. “When Ed’s father was feeling frisky, he used to say that. ‘My car sure is getting dull,’ he’d say. ‘It sure needs a good wax job.’ Mercy, mercy. It was our little code so Ed wouldn’t catch on, but I don’t know if we fooled him.”

I remembered the Saturday afternoon when I’d polished Dad’s car, trying to please him, or maybe I was just bored. I’d heard him tell Mother that his car was getting a little dull, so I

found the polish and an old sock in the garage and got started. He came out a while later and helped me finish up. We got along well that afternoon, working side by side, polishing and buffing. I didn't know his mood was so mellow because he and Mother had just—well, never mind.

“I'm going back to bed,” I said.

A few minutes later, B.A. came into the bedroom. “You're hiding in here.”

“No I'm not,” I said. “I suppose so.”

“I'm driving your mother home,” she said. “You and I have some unfinished business. Why don't you go take a shower.”

“Why don't I wait until you get back? We could shower together and you could help me with—”

“You're a big boy, Ed. You'll do fine. And you know I like to shower after.”

“We could—”

She shook her head. “Go!”

I was finishing my shower when I heard the bathroom door open and close. Through the steam I saw a woman by the sink. I turned off the water and opened the shower door.

“Did you get yourself clean, young man?” she said. Her cheeks flamed and I felt blood pulsing through my limbs. She was using the ice voice.

“Yes, ma'am,” I said. My voice cracked. “You can check me.”

“Turn around.”

I turned.

“That part still looks soapy. Rinse it off.” I think she almost smiled. “When you’re clean and dry, come find me.”

I didn’t bother with clothes because I thought she’d be waiting in bed, but our bedroom was empty and silent. Then I heard the muted thrum of a precision motor, the pitch rising, falling, then mounting again as the gears and rotors spun and whirred. Through the door of the spare room I watched B.A. guide the cloth under the thrusting needle. She looked up at me.

“I love this,” she said.

“Can I tell you something?”

“It looks like you already are. You naughty boy.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it,” I said. “When I was a kid, starting to, you know, masturbate, I was afraid Mother would catch me. But as long as I could hear her old Singer humming along, I knew I was safe. I could sneak off and have my little fun. I didn’t realize until just now what the sound of a sewing machine can do to me.”

“Pavlov,” she said.

“Pfaff love.”

“That’s a very bad pun, Ed. Please don’t say another word.”

So I didn’t.

Before she came to bed, B.A. clipped her hair up in a loose pile like she always did when we had sex. Then we kissed and fell into bed and when she was on top I reached up and began to loosen her hair.

“Ed, don’t,” she said. “You know my hair tangles too much when—”

I pressed my fingers to her lips and held them there. With my other hand I pulled the clip loose and dropped it on the floor.

When I began to take my fingers from her lips, she said “Ed—” and I pressed again, a little harder. Something primal shone in her eyes. I spread her hair across her shoulders. We didn’t speak again.

And when it was over and we were snug and sleepy in the warm ruffled bed, just drifting off, the phone began to ring. B.A. stirred, but left her head resting on my shoulder. “Aren’t you going to answer it?” she said quietly. “It might be your mother.”

“No, I’m not.” I turned a little and brushed her wild hair from her face. Her eyes were bottomless pools. *God, I love this woman.* “She can leave a message,” I said.

The answering machine engaged and we heard B.A.’s greeting. “We can’t take your call right now. At the tone, you know what to do.”

A beep. A pause.

Then, a resonant masculine voice: “Brenda Ann, this is your father. Call me, Cupcake.”

Her face, already flushed, glowed with a deeper fire. She closed her eyes and snuggled closer.

“Daddy,” she sighed, and smiled sweetly to herself.