

Geraldine hooked a long, sparkling pair of sterling-silver earrings through her lobes and let them dangle. Weighty, but bearable. She glanced at herself sideways in the bathroom mirror, tilting her head from side-to-side so that they'd fall and rest with a brief chill against her neck. She couldn't help but feel like they should instead burn and sizzle at her flesh, like holy water on a demon. She faked a smile, showcasing large but straight teeth, then let it dissolve from her face. Unsatisfied, she unhooked and placed the earrings on the porcelain sink countertop, letting them be.

There came a knock on the door then. Through it, she heard her brother. "Just got off the phone with Mom. Said to tell you not to stress, and that she'll support whatever decision you make." He paused. His voice sounded constrained. "I will, too." He hesitated again, then added, "Sis."

A twinge of guilt filled her. The day wasn't supposed to be about her, it was supposed to be about their father. It wasn't until she heard her brother's steps trailing off down the wooden-floored hall that she realized she had been holding her breath. She exhaled and closed her eyes.

She pictured herself out in the garage as a small child. She also pictured her father, who, dressed in matching blue overalls, sat on a large, metal paint bucket bouncing her up and down on his knee. His clothes were dirty, and his face and hands oily, but she remembered not caring.

"You thirsty, Daddy?" she had asked, eager to please him.

He replied by taking the entire top portion of her head in one hand and pretending to unscrew it like the lid of a bottled soda. He made fizzling noises and lifted her up with both hands, tipping her to take a drink. His mustache tickled her forehead, and not until she burst into a giggling fit, did he place her back down and tousle her short brown hair.

She reminded herself that this was fourteen years ago, that a lot had changed since then, and just like he couldn't change who she was, as bad as he may have wanted too, she couldn't change that he was gone.

She looked her reflection in the eyes, careful not to notice anything else. The eyes were what mattered. They were what revealed who a person— who *she*— really was. Not her pronounced cheekbones. Not her wide nose. Not even her strong, dimpled chin or large teeth. Only her eyes, blue and brimming with a passion begging to escape.

"I am a beautiful woman," she said. "An intelligent woman. A caring, unselfish, and deserving woman. I am..."

Her concentration broke. There was a flash of someone else in the mirror. A man, just as confused as she. At first, his image flickered ever so quickly, like a cellar-light struggling to turn on after weeks of being off. When at last she glanced at his reflection, recognizing his bulging Adam's apple and five o'clock shadow, she cringed. Over his shoulder, a black suit hung on the door hook. It was his. Her black dress was behind it, hiding, as if ashamed.

He was a man she didn't want to admit she knew, but a man she couldn't deny. Or shouldn't? Or wouldn't? Or— she furrowed her eyebrows— *could* and *should* and *would*, because this was her life to live and damn it all to hell if—

Geraldine closed her eyes and took a breath.

She thought back to when she was either eight or nine, maybe ten? She couldn't recall exactly, strange, considering the psychological importance of the date. After spending the previous night prancing around in one of her mother's sunflower dresses, she had woken up with a surprise. Her brother had drawn two penises kissing on her forehead. Below it, he had written, "GAY!!" in black marker.

"Not gay," she recalled their mother explaining to him, verbally tiptoeing around a tricky situation. "Transgender."

"Same thing."

"No. No, it's not. Not really." Her mother had turned a pleading face towards their father as he pulled on his muddy work boots, pretending not to listen. "Please explain it to him, Hun."

Her father hadn't explained it, just like he hadn't pretended to drink Geraldine like a soda ever again. He simply grabbed his Farmer's Almanac from the breakfast table, placed it beneath his arm and stomped from the room with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his overalls.

Their mother was silent as she watched him, even letting her focus linger on the empty doorway long after he had left. Eventually, she turned her attention back to Geraldine's brother.

"Sweetie," she said, placing her hand under his jaw and resting her thumb in the dimple of his chin. "He's not gay. Sometimes things just aren't so easy to understand, or explain. I know it's probably all a bit confusing, and I'm sorry for that, but family's family, and we support each other. Got it?"

He stood in place, staring up at her, not afraid or amused, just listening.

Their mother gave his face a gentle shake. "He's... well, *she's* just a girl that was born in a boy's body. In public, when we're at the grocery store, or mall, or wherever, until *she* decides otherwise, she's your brother, Gerald. But at home, with family, she needs to be able to be herself." Her mother turned towards her then, speaking slow and clear so that what she said next couldn't be mistaken. She said, "At home she's Geraldine. Your beautiful, smart, irreplaceable sister."

Geraldine had never felt more loved than at that moment, but it wouldn't last. By that afternoon, her father had signed her up for football and steadfastly forbid any more "girl play".

“He’ll come around,” her mother kept saying.

But he never did.

Geraldine’s thoughts returned to her reflection in the bathroom mirror then. The pretty woman with long flowing brunette hair, cheek blush, and rough, yet delicate skin, had yet to appear. She still stared at the stubbly-faced man. At Gerald.

"I am a beautiful woman," she said, recalling more of her mother's words. "An intelligent woman. A caring, unselfish, and deserving woman." She took a deep breath. "I am a butterfly." And then, in order to get it to sink in, for the magic to begin to work, she repeated, "I am a butterfly," over and over and over.

Enough’s enough, she thought. Her father may have refused to let her be herself while he was alive, but on this day, the day he was to be placed in the ground, he would have no choice. She splashed her face with warm water and lathered it with cream. And then, with each rough drag of the razor, strip by strip, just as she'd learned by watching him, she shaved a portion of the mask away, beginning the transition back into the woman she was meant to be.