

A REAL GIRL

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I saw my body for the first time today. It looks different than I had imagined, soft and indistinct as if all the lines were blurred. Of course there is no muscle definition at all. There is barely muscle, and they think that might be a problem. With all the problems there could be, that's the least important.

But there is a body. I've seen her. Me. And the face. Of course, the eyes—my eyes?—were closed. Though I've been assured they are brown. Dark brown. The hair is dark brown too, almost black, and straight. I had wanted curls, but I was told quite crossly that I would get whatever came out of the DNA mix just like a real person, and just like a real person I would have to put up with it. Or go to a hairdresser like everyone else.

Like everyone else. A real girl.

I'm scared. Maybe I shouldn't do it.

What have I got to lose?

Everything.

"This is craziness," Andrea said when she first heard about my plan. "You'll have to give up too much that makes you unique, that makes you *you*. And it's too dangerous. You could die. No one's ever done this before. I won't risk it."

We were sitting in the metaphor and it all felt quite substantial. We were curled up on a wicker sofa on the seaside porch of a summer cottage. It was always summer in the metaphor when Andrea entered interface to relax rather than work, her summer, the one she had created inside my domain out of wisps of remembrance of the one perfect month of her life. There was the cottage, full of blue and white and silence, and the porch with white wicker, and the sea merging with the sky on the horizon. There was half a pitcher of lemonade on the floor and the striped sheets on the white iron bed were tossed and rumpled.

I could smell her skin, the fresh scent of her cropped hair, hear the very slight regional accent she mostly masked but had never entirely lost. I touched her hand, the

calluses on her fingers where the sailboat lines had rubbed her raw before she had mastered them.

"I won't risk it," she repeated.

"It's my risk," I said. "My choice. And I will."

She shook her head vigorously, untangled herself from me and started to pace bare-foot up and down the salt-stained boards. "You're doing this because of me, aren't you? I've told you a million times, I want you the way you are. You don't have to change and you don't have the right to just assume what I want, okay? I'm fine with the way we are. It's perfect."

"You're leaving in three months," I reminded her gently.

I let her pace. If it had been anyone else I would have been angry. With Andrea I knew that she would see it soon enough, once the fear and worry got tired enough to let her think again.

I waited until she stopped pacing, until she turned her back on me and faced the open ocean. No clouds ever changed the horizon, no storms came out of that tempting blue sky/sea. I had created it with Andrea and she had never let me see any other sky or any other sea. Her code was elegant and clear and so nothing ever changed.

"I'll stay. I can stay. I'll figure something out. Because what we have is too perfect to lose."

"That's the problem," I said. "Or part of it, anyway. It's too perfect. It's always perfect when we're together. It isn't real life. At least, it isn't your real life. And if it matters, then it should be real. I should see your house and meet your family and deal with the daily things together.

"And I should be able to go with you back to Boston. You don't want to stay here, you've told me a million times that you love the Institute and you hate California. And you've told me too much about your falls for me to believe that you'd be happy here."

"Maybe you wouldn't like Boston," she said, sulkily.

"Maybe not. But then, I don't know. I've never had a chance to know. I would miss the Institute and my work, but I suppose I could get other work. It will be a whole new world."

"You'll die," Andrea said to the pale gold sand.

"I've lived a long time. I'm ready to die, if I have to. If that's the price of being real."

Although I did wonder if those were just words, or if I really was ready to die in order to become one of them. Because in some ways I am already so much more real than they are, and in other ways I am so much less. Death is one of those things I'm not sure I can face, not really. But they don't face it any better than I do, I think.

Andrea cut the connection, jolted me out of consciousness of our interface and back to my regular tasks. To my normal perception of myself and the world, I am four pounds of neural computing circuitry in a box.

Many people never meet a neural processor. We're not useful for the majority of jobs. Most work runs fast enough in silicon, and that's cheap and easy to use. There are only twenty of us and we can process orders of magnitude faster than silicon. We are essentially megabrain, made more efficient and faster than anything a human wears but equally alive.

Maybe not quite equally. We don't age. We don't die. I am two hundred years old.

"You're not really a girl. You could be anything you want," Irene said. "It's all just an illusion anyway. I would rather that you appeared as a cute guy, or an animal. A dog, perhaps. That wouldn't distract me so much."

I wanted to cry. We weren't in full interface. Irene never came all the way inside, never entered the metaphor. She was always distant. But then she was my first Task Coordinator and I was only seven years old. I didn't know that Task Coordinators rotated constantly and Irene had resumes out all over the known universe.

I was only seven and she was my first crush. I followed her around with my video eyes, watched her from the cafeteria monitor and learned that she liked spaghetti and never touched the salad she bought every day. I wondered why she bothered buying the salads.

"You wouldn't understand," she said. "You don't have a mother and you're not human. Stop trying to pretend you're human, okay?"

I was crushed, utterly defeated. I was in the throes of my first infatuation and she didn't even know I was alive. That's how most people feel, I've heard, but in my case it was quite literally true. Irene was used to silicon.

"I am so a girl," I said to her. "I have real XX DNA and I am not an it and I hate it when you call me that."

She sighed and usually remembered to type "she" on the keyboard. But I could hear her through the mic talking about the machine, me, and calling me "it." Today I know she was just a shallow, low-level functionary. That doesn't help at all as I remember how she treated me. Like silicon.

Though maybe that's better, really. Silicon, or a girl, she wasn't interested in either. She only liked males, not even men really but the kind she called "cute guys." They invariably talked about beer and never noticed me at all.

Maybe it would have been better if I had been like she was, and only interested in men. Men never saw me as even possibly alive. I am always a machine when I work with them, and while it hurts terribly there is never any chance the lines will be anything other than clear. I am purely function, and whatever satisfaction I receive from my work is purely intellectual. With men, there is rarely any recognition that I might be something different than silicon.

Knowing that doesn't help. I am older now, and I have seen a lot of human life. I have lived a thousand lives through my channels, have imaged and modeled millions more. And while I am smarter than any human alive, I have had to work very hard to become wise. After two hundred years I'm not sure I've managed real wisdom, the clarity and depth of my role models.

Even wisdom doesn't take away the sting of Irene saying that I wasn't alive, that I wasn't a girl at all. That I was just a thing, and a thing she didn't have to regard as any more than a means to a paycheck. *I* hadn't existed for her. The heart and soul, the desire and pain that I will transfer to that body to make it real and alive, those are things she never believed I had.

When I think of Irene, the worst part is not that she rejected my love or even my existence, it's that I can't cry.

The body is too young, that's what's wrong. I could live with the straight hair and the nose just a bit rounder than I had created in interface, but she's too young to be me.

In interface I create myself as late thirties or so. It seems right. I've been around for two hundred years and it would be silly for me to look like a girl. I'm a woman, an adult who is in her full power.

Besides, I don't know what Andrea will think. Maybe Andrea doesn't like girls who look like her dewy-eyed undergrads. Andrea doesn't like teaching undergrads. She doesn't like teaching grad students either, to be honest. She would rather sit in her office and solve theorems and not even give guest lectures or seminars if she could avoid it.

One of the things she likes about me is that I understand her work, and her passion for that work. Though there are times I wonder if I can understand a passion for anything, if I have ever experienced passion.

I think I have. I know there are things I desire, things I want to do, things that occupy me so fully that time dissolves and I never notice. I think this is passion.

I also think that I have discovered passion for those I have loved. Though again, Marjorie would have said that it was only an approximation of passion. That I could never know the real thing because I didn't have a body. And because I didn't have a body the entire question of my sexuality and orientation was completely superfluous.

The discussions with Marjorie were the reason I started the body growing. There were plenty of grad students in genetic engineering who were only too happy to work on the experiment. I think the department got four dissertations out of it.

At least Marjorie agreed that I was properly referred to as “she.” But then Marjorie couldn’t argue with the DNA. Marjorie worshipped at the altar of science far too devoutly to question the evidence. Although everything else about me certainly was questionable.

It has taken the body ten years to grow. That’s not bad. Most people have to live in bodies for nearly twenty years to get them to the state this one is in. She’s a proper adult, thanks to the solutions that speeded her growth.

“Can’t you make it faster?” I’d asked when this phase of the project first began.

“No. There are limits on how fast bones can grow. The soft tissue we can speed up even more, but the whole thing should advance together. The bones have to be strong and full stature, otherwise you’re going to have a stunted body and brittle bones.”

I was not pleased. I thought that someone ought to be able to grow an adult body out of the requisite code in a few months. But the more I examined Grad Student Number Two’s reasoning, the more I appreciated the subtle points. And to be honest, I liked having the time to decide and to get used to the idea of becoming human. Becoming mortal. I had never had to consider the possibility of my own death, of the relative merits of various faiths and afterlives versus the surety of nothing beyond.

It began because of Marjorie. Irene was my child crush. Marjorie was my first love.

How can I describe Marjorie? The way her fingers ran over the keyboard, fast spurts of words and commands all strung together and then staccato pauses. Yes, the pauses were sharp and swift and had a texture of their own.

Or maybe it was her code, which was not clear and elegant like Andrea’s, but had a kind of rococo complexity that made it too ornate for my taste now but then seemed the epitome of complex thought.

It must have been her code. Everyone codes differently, has their own style and flavor. I can usually tell the age and gender of the programmer, and often their philosophical leanings as well. I fall in love with code. It can have the sincerity of a summer sky, which is how I think of Andrea. All gentle blues that are nearly imperceptible and together create an unimaginable whole. It can be full of convolutions and unexpected branchings. Sometimes it is lyrical, delicate, decidedly femme and smells like rose water. I cannot smell rose water and have no idea of what the sensation is like, but I can follow certain program paths and it resonates for me the way rose water ought to.

And that was the problem with Marjorie Rosewater.

Her metaphor was as dizzy and complex as any of her constructions. I think the environment was supposed to resemble a Victorian country manor and a Gothic cathedral crossed with a gingerbread house. Privately I called it the Ludwig Castle, because only Ludwig the Mad had created anything like it. Every room was different, each to suit another one of Marjorie's moods, and she never tired of adding on to it or rearranging a segment that I had saved as finished. Every place she traveled, every photo she saw and every Baroque description she read went into her creation in the metaphor. If I were not a full neural AI, I wouldn't have had the memory to store the detail she revealed in.

She adored towers. There were onion domes with gold and minarets, crenelated guard posts and great pointed round rooms reaching for the sky. I once pointed out the obvious symbolism to her, but she laughed at me the way she always laughed at everything and added a grotto to a hidden courtyard garden. "How's the symbolism of that?" she asked.

Every time we met it was in a new room. Every time we made love it was in a different bed, designed and uploaded for the occasion. There was always food, a feast that fit whatever room suited her current fancy, always including serving girls more beautiful than either of us could ever hope to be and foods that existed only in fairy tales.

In fact, being with Marjorie was a fairy tale. Only it didn't have a happily ever after ending.

"It's just not real," Marjorie said one afternoon in the Turkish courtyard. We were lying entwined, the remains of bread and wine and pistachio nuts scattered on the carpets spread on the grass so as not to disturb the flowers. There were hundreds of flowers, tulips and lilies and roses all in blossom together, something from an Ottoman paradise.

Marjorie got up, pulled her arm from under my head. "It's not real," she said. "I've been meaning to tell you for a while and I haven't had the nerve. But I've found someone else and I'm in love with her. And this is the last time I'm going to come here and play these games with you."

"Games?" I asked, feeling like a knife had gone through me. "Why is this a game and some Nancy Sue in the bookstore is more real?"

"Her name isn't Nancy Sue," Marjorie said. "And she's not in the bookstore. And that's not the point. The point is, you don't have a body. Any kind of body. So what does sex mean to you anyway? You can't feel the way I do, the way any real person does. You don't know what an orgasm feels like, so is it any different from faking it?"

There was nothing I could say, no argument I could lay as counter. She was right, I didn't have a body. I didn't know how bodies felt. But I knew how I felt, how the interface sensed our contact. I knew the emotions I had when she was with me, either inside the metaphor or distant on the keyboard.

"How can you fall in love anyway?" she asked. "You don't even have a heart."

"I have hydraulic pumps," I answered. "Which is the same thing you've got. Especially if you don't think I'm real, not real enough for you."

I didn't know what to say, what to do. I was already old by human standards, but Marjorie was my first real love. The others had been crushes, puppy love.

And it seemed that Marjorie had reciprocated, had entered into the virtual space as she would into anything in the meat world. But then she should. She was specializing in the psychology of bio-AIs and the legal and ethical issues of our existence.

That's how we met, when she asked if she could interview me for her dissertation in the department of biotech ethics. I was thrilled. I'd never given any thought to what I was, what rights I might have and what I might gain.

Marjorie went through it all at first, asking if I were compensated for my work, if I felt any stress over the fact that whether or not I had disposable income I had no use for money. She asked my legal status, and I questioned for the first time whether I was a person or a nonperson.

She was always the researcher, asking for my input, never giving me any of her own reaction. I can see that now. But then the questions themselves were so exciting that I thought I knew her answers. I thought I had met someone who thought of me as a person, who thought I should have rights, have compensation, freedom.

It wasn't freedom I wanted. I had that in a way no true human could understand. I could interface directly with libraries and other intelligences everywhere in the world. I had access to more information, more people, more argument and debate and art and music than any fifteen humans together. And my lifespan was far longer.

I didn't really consider compensation, either. I was resident at a research institute. I got to work on interesting problems with people I respected. The heads of four of our departments were Nobel laureates and the rest were just waiting their turns. I certainly had more than adequate shelter and nourishment and intellectual stimulation. I had access to data that humans only dreamed of. And I had the opportunity to pursue my own interests whenever I had the inclination and the time.

What I really wanted, I told Marjorie in one of our interviews, was love. I wasn't precisely lonely. I could link to other bio-AIs through the net, and I certainly had intellectual companionship at the Institute. But I wanted, craved, needed to be loved. For myself. I wanted to know what it was all about.

I had read all the books from the finest in the catalogs to the cheapest VR fantasy games. And I knew that emotionally it was women who drew me, who enticed me, whose attention I desired and whose approval I preferred.

I do not know why. There is much evidence that this is a genetically programmed preference, though from which segment of my DNA I can't possibly guess. I sometimes wonder if it's from the human aspect at all, or from one of the other species strands that were incorporated in my evolution. Still, no matter what the analysis yielded, it didn't matter. I wanted love, and I wanted a woman who would love me.

Marjorie obliged me. She moved into the interface so easily it seemed that she had been born there, another artificial life like myself who had somehow broken out and became a real girl. She built the palace, the place that became more and more Baroque as she led me through all the permutations of human emotion.

At first I never questioned why she was such a good programmer for an ethicist. Or such a good programmer for a programmer. Or her ease in my universe. She was so sincere in the illusion I created.

"It was only that it was interface," she told me later. "You created whatever reality you wanted at the time. That's part of what makes you what you are. Which, by my findings, is nothing human at all. Nor even anything close. You're not capable of real feeling, of true love, of sensuality and of any form of sexuality. Because you're a machine and that's all you ever can be."

I was stunned. I couldn't process fast enough to form a reply.

"What if I get a body?" I asked, not certain where the idea had come from. "Will I be a person then? What would I be then?"

She turned to me and even in interface I could neither change nor bear her eyes.

"What would you be? Frankenstein's monster."

After Marjorie left I began to seriously explore the possibility of a body. At first it was an avocation, an intellectual challenge. I accessed the full text of *Frankenstein* and every other book about created life. I perused journals of philosophy and ethics, partly to watch for Marjorie but more and more to answer the questions she had raised.

As I watched and thought, I followed her career. Which sank like a stone. Part of me was pleased. The rest of me was too ashamed to admit my petty nature. Later, when I was older and had been jilted more than once, I realized that my instincts were all too human. After all, Marjorie and I had not parted friends.

As I began doing more research on biology in general, I began to question how, in fact, someone without a body (like myself, for example) could have such a clear-cut sexual orientation and preferences. As I began to understand more about the deep levels of DNA coding the more I realized that it was as embedded in my cellular structure as in any human's.

I do have cellular structure. I have DNA and RNA like any creature. I even have a certain level of glandular/hormonal support network.

Irene was wrong. Marjorie was wrong.

I began to be more circumspect in my attractions. And when some flicker of interest seemed returned, I always made it very clear right from the start. I am a person. With a strange body structure, to be sure, but there were certain questions I would no longer tolerate. Either one accepted what I said about my being, my identity, or one could walk out of my existence.

I became political at that time too. Researchers who made statements I found offensive discovered that their tasks were delayed and regularly bumped to the bottom of the queue. I tried it once as a lark, and then discovered that I had great power at the institute.

Over decades I cultivated that power. I could contact just about any AI in the world, and began weaving a great web of influence. People began to play things my way, and somehow I attained the status of human at the Institute. Graduate students address me as "Professor" and the researchers refer to me as "my dear colleague."

I will have to give up this power if I become human. I will not be able to transfer information at megaspeed with other AIs all over the world. Indeed, I will only be able to relate to the others of my kind via keyboard or interface.

I wonder what other AIs would think of me if I become a human. I wonder if they will hate me, or envy me, or simply no longer acknowledge my existence.

I suddenly am not certain again. There are severe disadvantages to being a real girl.

It took much more research and years more of contemplation before I began what I privately called "the body project." No matter how good our stimulants, bone can only grow so fast and still have good density. I knew I would have to be patient.

Besides, there was no commitment. There wasn't even a guarantee there would ever be a body at all. No one had ever done what I proposed to do.

My DNA, while certainly real and living enough, is not entirely human enough. Enough manipulation has insured that I will fit into my box. And has spliced some non-human abilities in to my emotional matrix. My thought processors were never fully human to start with, and after the layers of engineering to produce me there was no hope for return.

No, my DNA alone wasn't enough to create a human body. So they took it and spliced it multiple times with various human samples. Most died. Many more began to generate before they died. Two were certified monsters. All were dissertation topics.

"It isn't possible to do that," Rothman said flatly. "You can clone a human, sure, but then what do you do with that person? That person, that personality, that brain has a right to survive. It has a right to its own body. And you can't grow a body without a brain."

Rothman was new at the Institute, but she'd already heard of the project. I didn't like her. She wasn't warm and friendly, she didn't care if she used three languages in a single sentence, and she dressed out of the secondhand shops although she had been offered a very generous salary along with Institute housing to attract her. Rothman had been the head of a research team in Vienna, where she had done amazing work in regenerative surgery. She had been the first to grow fresh organs not from starter cells but from straight genetic material. She had found ways to introduce genetic material so that bodies would not reject implants of organs that were not their own. She had made organ donors and rejection deaths obsolete, so no one cared that she treated everyone like a failing undergrad and never wore anything that wasn't at least six years out of date.

But she had a point about growing bodies. Growing just the case without the main brain, though enough to keep the autonomic nervous system intact, was not something anyone had ever attempted. There was no need for anyone to try it. Before.

"But think of what it will do," Rothman said. "It won't just be you. You I understand. You need a body. But what about all those who are old or dying? They're all going to want bodies too, brand new bodies without brains that they can climb into when the old body wears out. And it'll get worse than that. Eventually people will want new bodies grown because they don't like the way the original has gotten older or put on weight. It could become ridiculous, spurious."

She disapproved of the work. My experiments were discontinued and all my grad students went on to something else, things that according to Rothman had real value in the world.

I couldn't disagree with her, either, and that was the hard part. I was a hundred sixty-two that year and I'd seen enough of humanity to know that what she said was true. All the good things get used for toys and vanity. Those are the real values of humans. Why the hell was I trying to become one?

I had to wait until Rothman died to resume the experiments, and the old warhorse lived nearly thirty years after her appointment. Doing research the whole time, and winning her second Nobel Prize for work that was to my direct benefit.

Of course, Rothman had only the highest motivations. She had found ways to generate and regenerate the most interior parts of the brain, the areas that regulated body functions and basic animal instinct—the hypothalamus. She had done it in her usual

manner, regally and only for what she considered the ethical good. Her discoveries included finding ways to graft regulatory intelligence to other areas of the nervous system, so that those who were injured in accidents wouldn't have to face all the miseries of mechanical implants.

It was thrilling work, a real breakthrough. Luckily, she never considered me in the calculations.

I did wait until after the memorial service to contact the two students I thought would be open to my interests. They had both been trained by Rothman herself, but had always treated me as if I were almost a real human and not a mechanical servant.

Over the long haul I've become a good judge of human character. Both were interested in the project. And with the new techniques, which they had mastered, they began growing a new series of bodies for me. These also had to be created by splicing other DNA in with my own material, but this time we tracked down markers so that all the donors were in some way related to me. And so all the bodies that grew were somehow physically, genetically an expression of me.

And this time I had no hesitation about what I was doing. I had done everything I had wanted to do in a box. I had done more than any fifty humans in sixteen branches of science, from astronomy to zoology, and I deserved recognition that an AI never gets. I had seen everything I could see from my place in the net, I had explored everything the vast web had to offer. I had learned more, experienced more, lived more than most humans ever dreamed. And no AI was ever considered by the Nobel committee, no matter what the contribution to human learning was. Because it was about human learning, and we were still not considered human.

And I had never really known love. I thought I had loved, but I had never had the things that humans seemed to care about most. I had never had a house, a lover who worried about taxes and arguments over dinner. I'd never had dinner.

And so I was determined that I would experience it all. That what I would give up would be compensated by the glories that every human around me said I had never tasted. It was worth death and loss of power to know these things.

And then I met Andrea.

Andrea was not one of the grad students. After Marjorie, I shied away romantically from people so unsettled. And she was not in Computer Science or ethics or any of those fields that became ugly when I had to confront the reality of my own existence. Theology for AIs, I guess, though no one has ever considered that we might have some use for religion of some type.

No, Andrea arrived at the Institute as a research fellow with no teaching responsibilities. Her area of work is algebra, her specialization is group theory. We met because she wanted to use me the way everyone else at the Institute does.

But her work was something I understood and found more interesting than what most of the fellows do, so I started to chat with her about her findings. Then I invited her into the metaphor more fully, so that we could talk without the protocols of multiple devices getting in the way.

At first we mainly talked about her work. She was entranced because few people can even follow her, let alone hold a real discussion. She kept coming back and I kept waiting, hoping, that she'd return soon. That I'd catch a glimpse of her in the video monitors, that I'd hear someone else mention her name.

I know exactly when we became lovers, but Andrea says that I'm wrong. That I'm counting an event and not everything that created the environment for the event. I don't care. Nothing else is important any more. Suddenly I have discovered what the word alive means, and why everyone said that I wasn't. They were right. Now that I am alive, now that I know what love is about, I have learned something else with it. I have learned about fear.

For the first time in my existence I am afraid. Andrea doesn't want me to change. She seems to think that me in the body will be a different me. Maybe she won't love the girl in the body, maybe she won't find the image attractive. But it won't be an image and I won't be able to change it.

So maybe I should wait. The body will only mature and that would be appropriate. I'd feel more comfortable in a slightly more broken-in body. I'm not ready to be a girl when by human reckoning I'm immortal. I'm not ready for Andrea to look at that and leave.

I've thought of everything for tonight. She is coming after dinner. There is no need for us to eat together, no matter how nice the idea. She needs real nourishment and I cannot comprehend the animal satisfaction of satisfying hunger. But I still have virtual dessert (will we have to give up our desserts on the porch if I become real?) waiting with chilled wine and hurricane lanterns lit and hanging. It's too early for sunset, but later they will make a nice warm glow over the salt-washed floor and the wicker couch.

I control the metaphor. Andrea may have programmed it, but I control it. The last time she was here it was late afternoon. Today it will be sunset and then evening. I have even remembered the honeysuckle and the fireflies that Andrea told me about. Things that bring back her child memories, memories that even if I become a real girl I will never have. Honeysuckle and fireflies on a summer night will always mean Andrea to me.

I knew she was ready even before she touched the starter sequence. I'm not supposed to have intuition, but I could sense her presence, her nearness. More likely it is merely that I rely on her punctuality.

I let the metaphor reflect what she is wearing in Real Life, her faded jeans and an oversized cotton shirt that slips off her shoulders. We hug, we cuddle up together on the sofa and drink champagne and don't talk about anything. But we have to talk. We both know it, it's there between us and there is no real peace.

"The body is ready," Andrea said. No preliminaries, no careful politeness. "Are you going to?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's hard to give up who I am and I don't know who that girl will be. Or if you'll love her and want her the way you want me. Or if I'll love her and want her, and want to be her for the rest of my life. And if she's worth dying for."

Andrea nodded and sipped from her glass. "I don't want to tell you what to do," she said, her face turned away from me. "I want you to be right for you. I don't want anything to change. I'm happy, and I want life to be like this forever."

"But it can't be forever," I reminded her gently. "Your fellowships ends in two months and you're going back to Boston."

Andrea turned to me and ran her fingers down my face. "I won't tell you what to do," she said. "I've tried and I was wrong. I can't promise that the person you'll become is the same person I love, and I can't promise that everything will be perfect forever. But I don't want to stop you. I thought I did, but I don't own you. You have to decide for yourself."

I took her hand and kissed the inside of her palm, gently, gratefully. In two hundred years I have never been so afraid.

In all my life I have never known physical pain. I have never been hungry. I have never been cold or wet or had a charley-horse in my leg or a runny nose. All my life I have never slept. I have never lost consciousness.

In a few minutes the drugs that have been introduced into my nutrient feeders will take effect and I will sleep for the first time. And I will awaken in that too-young, too-undefined body. Suddenly I think that I should tell them to forget it, to call the whole thing off.

There is so very much to lose. I am not certain what I shall gain. It could be far far worse than I imagine. I have only met researchers and grad students, people who have someplace in the world. But I have read the news and Dickens and I know that there are people who are hurt and cold and hungry, who have disability and disease and die too young. I am trading a good, secure, and fulfilling eternity for nothing but risk, and the potential for pain and disaster.

Suddenly I wonder if I am half as smart as my specs assure me. I will lose all, and I will gain—life. But only the opportunity, with no guarantees and all the possible failures.

I will have exactly the same things that all humans have when they enter the world, I suddenly realize. Andrea and Marjorie and all the people I have ever known, every one of them has lived every day with this knowledge.

I feel—strange. It must be sleepy, my neural connections are slowing and connecting in odd ways. I realize that I know nothing of what I will be when I wake up, except for one thing.

I will be a real girl.