

Identity

by Zoë Blade



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A short story by Zoë Blade

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“Flat-chested Faye, flat-chested Faye,” chanted the girls on the table next to Faye and Rebecca's. The large hall smelled of cabbages, potatoes and baked beans, and everyone else was talking and eating and moving chairs so loudly that Faye could hardly hear herself think.

“Just ignore them,” suggested Rebecca.

Faye didn't say anything. She opened her lunchbox and fished around in her deep blazer pockets for her medication. She teased a pill out of the bottle and washed it down with some orange squash from her Helen Fryer thermos flask.

“It's not healthy to have secrets, you know.” Rebecca peered across at her, trying to make out the label on the bottle.

“They're called antiandrogens.” Faye slipped the bottle back into her pocket. “I told you, I have a hormonal imbalance, that's all.” It wasn't even a white lie, she told herself. It was just being vague.

“Is that why you haven't... you know... developed yet?” Rebecca took a bite out of her sandwich.

“It's not healthy to be so pushy, either.” Faye forced herself to start eating her lunch; she wasn't feeling hungry.

“Sorry,” said Rebecca. She took a sip of her drink. “It's just that it's not the same without you during swimming lessons. Who else am I going to tease?”

"I'm sure there must be someone," said Faye.

Rebecca looked up as she thought to herself. "How come you're not allowed to go swimming with us, anyway? Just because you haven't started puberty yet? I mean, Jenny's way behind everyone else too and she still goes swimming."

"I'd rather not talk about it." Faye didn't dare to look up from her food. She could already feel herself getting the kind of headache that meant she'd start crying soon if she wasn't careful. She tried to change the subject. "Have you done the new Fryer episode?"

"What, this?" Rebecca pulled a silver disc out of her blazer pocket, holding it up for Faye to see. "You want to try it?"

"I think I could be persuaded." Faye looked up long enough for her eyes to meet Rebecca's. Big mistake. She tried not to think about how they seemed to radiate a sense of playful mischief, or about the curly trusses of auburn hair partially hiding them.

Rebecca handed the disc to Faye, and for an instant, their hands touched as she took it from her.

"Thanks." Faye slid the disc into her pocket and tried to concentrate on finishing her meal.

Faye stared up at a bright blue sky that wasn't there and listened to a dozen conversations about nothing in particular. She breathed in deeply, savouring the scent of the freshly cut grass she wasn't really lying on. Although she was actually lying on her bed, her senses were all being hijacked by the Digitac player lying next to her as it replayed the sensory input of Helen Fryer, one of the country's most popular actresses. She saw and heard everything that Helen did, but she was helpless to try and direct her where she wanted to go. She was just an observer, albeit a very intimate one.

Faye felt someone squeeze her hand, and turned to face him. Naturally, it was James. He had the kind of rugged good looks that were currently considered attractive by most of the

girls in her class. His bleached blonde hair was just long enough to get in the way of his hazel eyes, and whenever she kissed him, his stubble felt like sandpaper. She wasn't quite sure if she had a type yet, but if she did, James definitely wasn't it.

"I love you, James," she felt herself say.

"I love you too, Helen," said James. His smile widened, and Faye felt hers do the same. He leaned towards her. She reciprocated, closing her eyes. As their lips met, she started to open her mouth, letting him separate her lips with his tongue.

Eww, thought Faye as she opened her eyes and groped around for her Digitac player's stop button, overwhelmed by the two sets of images competing in her head. She pressed it just in time. Suddenly, the bright blue sky was replaced with the various posters of female rock stars that lined her bedroom's walls. The chattering of passers-by came to an abrupt end, and in its place she could hear the dull murmur of her parents' old fashioned flatscreen television downstairs.

Looking down at herself, Faye sighed wistfully. At least she'd slipped out of the unfashionable blazer, blouse, polyester skirt and opaque black tights of her school uniform. Instead, she was wearing a light pink spaghetti top over a padded bra - as if *that* was fooling anybody - and a blue denim miniskirt, clothes she wouldn't mind actually being seen in, but that didn't change the fact that the other girls were right. She *was* flat-chested.

She reached into her bedside drawer, lifted up a stack of glossy magazines and pulled out the Digitac disc she'd been too embarrassed to tell anyone about.

She read the disc's title: *The Kelly Travis Workout Experience*. It had come free with a packet of cereal, the kind that wasn't covered in sugar. It was meant to show you that working out at a Kelly Travis gym wasn't as difficult as you thought it was. Faye ejected the Helen Fryer disc and tossed it onto the bed next to the player, then slid the Kelly Travis

disc in and pressed play.

Within moments, she was running on a treadmill in front of a full length mirror. She could smell her own sweat, sharp and strong, but it didn't matter. Closing her eyes again, she stared at her own face, or at least the face of a nameless actress, blue eyes staring back at her from behind a blonde fringe, smiling with determination and the knowledge that she could push herself further this time. Digitac actresses almost always smiled. She pushed a few buttons on the treadmill's keypad, and it beeped in reply as the motor sped up.

Her muscles soon started to ache, but it was worth it. She could feel every inch of her fully developed and well defined body. Every footstep filled her with the kind of satisfaction she couldn't get in real life. She was supple and slender, but not dangerously thin anymore. She was fully grown, with curves she would do anything to have in real life.

Without warning, Faye felt a tap on her shoulder. She pressed the stop button on the player again and opened her eyes.

"Your father and I would like to have a word with you when you're ready." Her mother was standing by the bed, looking down at her.

"What did I do?" protested Faye.

"It's nothing like that."

Faye squinted up at her mother, shielding her eyes from the bedroom light with her hand. "What do you want then?"

Her mother sighed in frustration. "Please, just come down."

By the time Faye walked into the lounge, the television was off. Her parents were sitting in silence, staring at the fireplace. It was still covered in cards wishing Faye a happy birthday.

"Please, sit down, dear," suggested her mother.

Faye sat down on the couch, facing both her parents.

They looked solemn, like the time her uncle had died.

Her mother cleared her throat. "You know how you're... different from the other girls?"

"I don't like Helen Fryer as much," suggested Faye.

"Not that." Her mother sounded frustrated again now.

"Your body," said her father, almost apologetically. "You know, the reason you work on your algebra while your friends have their swimming lessons."

"Oh." Faye suddenly realised what they were getting at. "*That.*" She looked down at the shag carpet.

Years ago, her parents had sat her down for a similar talk. They had told her about how all babies have thorough medical checks these days, ever since the government worked out that prevention was cheaper than cure. When she'd had hers, the high definition MRI scan had apparently revealed that she was a perfectly healthy baby girl - despite her body giving her the appearance of a perfectly healthy baby boy.

It was an age old condition, her parents had told her. In a funny sort of way, they'd said, she was lucky to have been born when she was. As recently as a few decades earlier, people with her medical issue had to work it out for themselves after decades and sometimes even lifetimes of mental anguish. Nowadays it was something your doctor told your parents at birth.

"I know you don't exactly like your body," said her father.

"I look like a freak," muttered Faye.

"That's not true," said her mother sharply. "You look just as lovely as any of your friends."

Faye didn't say anything. It simply wasn't true. Karen and Sarah and Louise all had to start wearing training bras this year, and here she was with a flat chest and an unsightly bulge in her knickers. It was hideous. Her skin crawled just thinking about it.

"Those pills you're taking are just a temporary measure," her mother continued. "They're delaying your puberty, but you can't take them forever." Her mother's voice became

unusually soft and quiet. "You're going to have to make a choice."

"What kind of choice?" asked Faye, her eyes still fixed on the floor. She could feel them welling up already.

Her father piped up. "We can give you some other pills that will give your body the oestrogen it ought to be producing. They'll make you look more like your friends, you know, put some weight on your hips and..." he glanced at her chest, unable to be so blunt to his own daughter. "...other places." He quickly changed the subject, adding, "But you'll have to meet us half way, you understand, and start eating properly."

Faye looked up at him, hope in her eyes. He looked blurry behind her tears.

"Plus, you know... we've been saving away since your birth. I know Christmas and your birthday have always been lean, but you'd be able to have an operation to fix..." he glanced down at her groin. "...you know."

"Really? You mean it?" Faye sniffed.

"There is another option," her mother pointed out. "I don't want to pressure you into anything, but it would mean your body wouldn't be so scarred. You could use the money to go to college, and you could even have children one day. It *would* be nice to have grandchildren."

Her father gave her mother a look that silenced her.

"What do you mean?" asked Faye, her eyes darting from her mother to her father.

"There's a new operation you can have." Her father shifted in his seat. "They came out with it a few years ago."

"It's perfectly safe," assured her mother. "Lots of girls with your condition have had it."

"What kind of operation?" Faye didn't like the sound of this at all.

"It would mean you wouldn't mind your body so much." Her mother looked hopeful. "In fact, you'd welcome its growth."

Faye tried to work out what her parents were getting at.

“What kind of operation?” she repeated.

“It has something to do with the way the brain's wired up,” said her father.

“Brain surgery?” spluttered Faye, shocked that her parents could suggest such a thing.

“You'd still be you,” assured her mother.

“For the most part, anyway,” corrected her father.

“Oh, stop scaring her!” scathed her mother. Facing Faye again, she added, “You'd still be the same person. You'd just be... well... a boy.”

Before Faye knew what had happened, she'd dashed out of the room. She ran up the stairs, their outline a blurry mess behind her tears, and slammed her bedroom door shut before flopping onto her bed, her eyes buried in her arm.

When she finally let herself sob uncontrollably, it was a relief in a way. She just let go, letting the pain wash over her. The pile of soft toys by her side offered no comfort, their presence suddenly seeming childish. As much as her parents kept on saying how much they loved her, she got the feeling all her mother really cared about was having grandchildren.

“So what did you think of him?” asked Rebecca as she sat on her bed, her back against the wall.

“Who?” asked Faye. She made an effort to stop gawking at her best friend's perfectly curled tresses as she snapped out of her daydream.

“*James*,” said Rebecca, slightly jerking her head forward to show her frustration.

“Oh.” Faye took the silver disc out of her pocket and handed it to her. “Thanks.”

“You're not getting out of the question *that* easily!” Rebecca took the disc and put it on a stack on the shelf next to the bed.

“I dunno.” Faye shrugged. “He's OK, I guess.”

“Just *OK*?” asked Rebecca in disbelief.

"It's not like I wanna have his babies or anything," said Faye.

"Geez, you don't like Toby, you don't like James, who *do* you like?" Rebecca scrunched her face up for a split second.

"I like you," pointed out Faye.

"Yeah, but not *like* like. Not like you like boys."

Faye made an effort to look away from Rebecca's soft cheeks and her perfect lips. "What's meant to be so good about boys, anyway?"

"They have their moments," said Rebecca. "Some of them do, anyway. Maybe not the ones in *our* class, but once they're a bit older, maybe."

"Sounds like a long wait." Faye kept her gaze on the floor.

"They just take a few more years to grow up, is all. Give them a while, you'll see. Besides, if you didn't like boys, who *would* you like?"

"Faye!" called Rebecca's mother from downstairs. "Your mother's here!"

"I'd better go." Faye stood up. "Thanks for the Fryer episode."

"That's OK." Rebecca looked at her the same way she looked at caterpillars and butterflies, her eyes focused with well meaning curiosity. For a second, Faye forgot to worry about the choice she had to make and about deciding how much she could tell Rebecca and just let herself get lost in her smile.

Faye stared up at her familiar posters of female rock stars as she lay down on her bed in deep thought.

On the one hand, she didn't want to die. She figured the person who'd recover from the brain surgery, however nice he might be and however happy he might become, simply wouldn't be her. Sure, he'd resemble her like a brother might and he'd keep her memories as a strange sort of memento, but he'd have different drives, different ambitions, a different

outlook on life. Wouldn't he?

Besides, she couldn't bear the thought of giving a complete stranger, someone who didn't even exist yet, all of her emotional baggage. The memories of trying to cope with her birth defect, of trying to make sense of it, and of being constantly bullied at school because of her differences... she didn't even want this knowledge herself, and the thought of crippling someone else with it made her cringe.

On the other hand, someone else would have a much better chance of actually being happy. He'd still inherit her psychological scars, but not the dozens of physical ones that the necessary surgery would give her. Maybe her childhood would seem as distant and unreal to him as a *Digitac* episode did to her.

So it boiled down to a choice between growing up to be a woman with low self esteem and a malformed body, and donating the rest of her life to some boy who - strange memories aside - might actually qualify as normal. His life would certainly be easier than hers, especially if he also wanted to date girls.

She grabbed her pillow, hugged it and curled up into a ball. Why did this have to happen to her? She was just a girl trying to lead an ordinary life.

In the end, she finally made a decision. She was pretty sure it was the *wrong* decision, but she didn't know what else to do. At least this way, she'd stop being such a burden and an embarrassment to everyone.

"This is your last chance to change your mind," said the doctor in a soft, sympathetic voice. He put his hand on hers. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Faye looked down at their hands. Her wrist was encased in a light blue bracelet with her name and date of birth printed on it. They'd soon have to change it, she realised.

Of course I'm not sure, she thought. Was anyone? She

held back a tear. "Yes, I'm sure," she said, nodding. She just wanted to get it over with.

* * *

David opened his eyes. A blurry white light filled the room. Slowly, everything came into focus. He was lying on a hospital bed, soaked with sweat. A fan was perched on the table next to the bed, blowing a gentle breeze of fresh air into his face. He looked around. There was a bag with a liquid in it suspended above him, with a tube running down to his arm. He found a mirror on the table, next to the fan, and picked it up. Holding it in front of his face, he gazed at his reflection.

It was the same as it had always been, of course, except that where long, frizzy hair used to be, there was now a tightly wrapped bandage, stained with blood. It was clearly the face of a young boy staring back at him. For the first time, he wasn't repulsed by it. It wasn't like looking at a stranger he grudgingly had to put up with. It was more like... he thought about this. It didn't really feel like anything at all. His reflection didn't provoke any kind of emotion in him. It wasn't good, it wasn't bad, it was just who he was. That had always been the problem with Faye, though: not that her body was *bad*, just that it simply wasn't who she was.

He could remember everything. Not just Faye's actions, but her innermost thoughts. He remembered the way that some evenings, as she went to bed, she would look down at her flat chest and lack of curves and feel the headache that meant she was about to cry. He even remembered how she'd secretly started to feel about her best friend, Rebecca. Those memories were his now, but the feelings weren't.

Looking down at the outline of the slightly malnourished but otherwise healthy young body hidden beneath the bed sheets and medical gown, he felt no repulsion any longer. Despite the nausea and the overwhelming feeling that he

needed to get some rest, in a weird sort of way, he felt fine for the first time in his life. It was finally over.

As he walked up to Rebecca's house, David scratched the scar on the back of his head. He still wasn't used to the feeling of the short bristles of hair against his fingers. He pressed the doorbell and waited.

Rebecca's mother answered the door, but she didn't greet him with enthusiasm like she usually did. Instead, she looked at him like she was expecting him to introduce himself.

"Hi. It's me, David," he said. Seeing no hint of recognition in her eyes, he added, "Henley."

"Oh." She seemed taken aback. "Of course. Please, come in." She opened the door wider and turned around to face the stairs. "Rebecca! Your friend's here!" Turning back to face David, she assured him, "I'm sure she won't be long," before disappearing into the kitchen.

David waited in the hallway until Rebecca finally crept down the stairs, coming to a stop half way down the staircase. She looked almost afraid. It made David's stomach hurt, to know that he was the cause of the pained look on her face.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi." She squeezed her arm as if she was nervous.

"You haven't been to see me or anything," he said. "You still like me, right?"

"*Like* you? I don't even *know* you." Rebecca waited what seemed like forever before she next spoke. When she did, her voice was soft, as if she was recounting a painful tale. "Three years ago, my best friend moved to the other side of the country, and I never got to see her again. We still e-mail each other, of course, but it's not the same. For the longest time, I didn't have anyone to help me make it through the day. Until I met you. Until I met Faye, I mean. Now it's happening all over again, only worse than that, because it's like a part of Faye's still here, and you're running around, oblivious to the

fact that you've stolen it from her.”

“Oh.” David didn't know what else to say.

“Is that all you've got to say? 'Oh'?”

“I guess I didn't see it that way. I was hoping we could still be friends.” David looked at Rebecca, but her eyes seemed sharp and cold. “You know, like you and her were. You and me, I mean. I still remember everything, you know. How you'd laugh together, or swap secrets about boys.”

“Yeah, well not anymore, OK?”

David stood in silence, trying to think of something to say to make it all better. Deep down, he knew there was nothing he could say or do that could change how Rebecca felt.

“So is this it?” David eventually asked. “Is this how we're going to say goodbye? You meant everything to her.”

Rebecca paused, as if she wanted to say something but wasn't sure if she should. Finally, she said, “She loved me, didn't she?”

David nodded.

Rebecca looked straight ahead as if she was talking to the front door. “I loved her too, I think. Despite everything.” She turned to face David. “That's why it hurts to look at you.”

“I'm sorry,” said David. He cursed himself for not being able to think of anything better to say.

Rebecca didn't reply to him, but as he walked out the door, he could have sworn he'd heard her whispering, “So am I.”