

Equality Day

By Mindy Quigley

The first time I saw a woman, I must've been about five. My Auxiliary Parent and I had gone to the new water sledding park and were waiting in line to enter the flume. The woman got in line just behind us, her hands clutching her watersled. I had never seen someone whose appearance fell so far outside the benchmark standards. Her fizz of untamable curls and cotton-white skin, so different from the bronze features of the benchmark humans all around us, seemed to heat me up from the inside.

I pointed. "Look, Auxie!" A few pairs of reproachful eyes flashed in my direction, but mostly the people in line pretended they hadn't heard. The woman's chin tipped downward almost imperceptibly.

Auxiliary Parent's grip on my hand tightened, and I felt a quick, sharp tug on my arm. "It's rude to stare," ze hissed.

I planted my gaze on the tops of my bare feet. As the line tiptoed ahead, though, I stole glimpses. The curves of the woman's body bulged and undulated in a way that seemed liberated from the confines of her bathing tunic. She bore almost no similarity to Auxiliary Parent or Primary Parent or to the straight, sleek humans waiting in the line. And none of them seemed to feel the attraction-repulsion of her presence, though it set my whole body abuzz.

"What's a recessive?" I asked, raking my fork through a plump mound of mashed potatoes.

Primey looked at Auxie, whose fork and knife floated a few inches above ze's plate. "It's not a nice thing to say," Primey said at last. "I don't ever want to hear you using that word."

A few months had passed since I'd seen the woman. I'd started school, and the more people I came into contact with, the more I noticed deviations from the benchmark. Just that morning, Arleck Spenster, a wisp of a child in my instruction year, had been taunted to tears. Two older children circled around ze after class, chanting, "*Recessive Arleck doesn't reach the benchmark.*"

I didn't understand their words, but no one had to tell me I should be glad I conformed to the standard height range for human children. After the others had gone, Arleck and I were left alone in the hallway.

"Maybe you'll grow someday," I said quietly. Arleck just shrugged and walked away.

Years went by, and the sight of deviations became, if not quite routine, at least familiar. Even within my instruction year, we had those like Arleck who fell outside the benchmark height range and others who had non-standard characteristics like un-brown eyes or un-bronze skin. Full-fledged women were among the rarest kinds of deviations. We'd learned in Instruction Year 4 science that, despite advances in medical technology, the chances of being born a man or woman instead of a normal human had stayed stubbornly around 1 in 20,000.

In the early days of the government's Supported Reproduction Scheme, the rate of babies born with recessive traits such as male or female genitals fell sharply year on year. Humans had reason to hope that eventually population-wide equality would be achieved. A few decades into the program, though, the rate of benchmark attainment plateaued. The Chief Geneticist's Office announced that occasional swerves outside the standard phenotypical range were unavoidable and would have to be accommodated.

The Individuals with Deviations Act, ensuring equal treatment of those with recessive traits, was a sign of how far we'd come.

Sometime during Year 10, my friend Halo and I found some outdated tech stored in my basement. Halo picked up Primey's old digimager and began to play the holofilms on it. Mostly the holofilms showed me when I was little—as a baby splashing in a pool somewhere, a birthday party at the Skyplex, back when it was new.

"What's this?" Halo asked, pointing to a sub-nested file directory. Halo drilled into the nested files until a holofilm sprang to life. Within it, two women lay stretched out on a couch, fully nude.

I was at an age where I'd often look at pornographic holofilms of other people's sexual stimulation areas. But even the most graphic depictions of stimulation, or the halting explorations I'd made of the slightly raised, honey-colored SSA embedded below my own navel, were as freakishly different from these women's anatomy as a pocket giraffe is from a snake-skinned elk.

"My sibling told me about this," Halo said. "There're whole holofilm studios that make freak porn. You know, with black-skins, giants, whatever—the more recessive the better." The women writhed on the couch, rubbing mounds of each other's flesh and licking each other like wild creatures. "Damn, your Primey's into some pretty messed up stuff," Halo giggled. "Look at that one's SSA."

"Yeah, that's messed up," I said. I grabbed the digimager and switched it off, barely able to contain the queasy thrill that rippled from the tips of my toes to the roots of my hair.

How could I explain to Halo what pinged around inside my brain? That to me the women were powerful, magnetic—more than human, almost.

“So you two met in law school?” Halo used ze*s teeth to pull the last piece of chicken off a skewer, then flourished the pointy end toward Cairn like a conductor waving a baton.

Cairn stood near the grill chatting to Auxie. I nodded. “At an Equality Day Rally, actually,” I said.

“So I guess today is kind of your anniversary,” Halo replied.

“I suppose. Although it took me nearly six months to convince her to go out with me.”

Primey was sitting next to me, and I could almost feel ze wince at the word “her.”

Primey and Auxie had taken the news of my relationship with Cairn far better than I’d feared, but even for them, gendered pronouns still sounded like provocations, or profanity.

Primey rose and picked up the empty platter in front of us. “Looks like it’s time for a refill,” ze said. “And I’ve got to get the ice cream cake out of the freezer.”

Halo laughed. “Wouldn’t be an Equality Day picnic without your famous ice cream cake. Guess some things never change.” Halo and I sat silently for a moment, looking over to where Cairn, Auxie, and a few others were standing. Cairn laughed at something, sending a joyous ripple through her long burgundy hair. “So how does that all work?” Halo asked.

“What?” I asked.

“You know...stimulation?” Ze mimed the rapid finger movements used in SSA arousal.

“Just stop,” I replied, pressing my fingertips into my eyelids. “Our relationship is just like everyone else’s. Cairn is an amazing human, an amazing woman. She was top of our class. She just published a paper in the law review.”

“Oh, god. You’re not turning into one of those True Equality Movement people are you?” Halo made the TEM’s symbol with ze*s hands and pursed ze*s lips in mock piousness. Ze broke the exaggerated pose and continued, “The TEM ideology doesn’t even make

sense. They want to be different *and* equal? I mean, how's that supposed to work? It's a contradiction."

Later that night, Cairn and I stood before the double sinks in my childhood bathroom.

"I heard you and Halo talking," she said. She leaned toward the mirror and calmly threaded a piece of floss between her teeth. It was typical of her style—unemotional, letting other people react.

I spit a mouthful of toothpaste foam into the sink. "Halo's always liked to bait people," I said. "I learned a long time ago that arguing with Halo is a waste of time. Half the time ze doesn't even believe the garbage ze*s saying."

Cairn lowered her hands. "How about you? Do you believe what you're saying?"

"How do you mean?"

"When we first got together you told me you've always been fascinated by women."

"But not like that. Not like those fetish creeps. You know that."

"Even if I'm not your fetish, are you sure I'm not your fantasy?" Her laugh was bitter, mirthless. Her eyes, however, held their customary composure.

"Cairn, I love you. Forget what anybody else sees when they look at us. Inside, you and I are exactly the same." I took her hands, floss and all. "When I'm with you, I *feel* like a woman. It's crazy, but there's a part of me—a woman inside—she becomes free."

"Inside," Cairn said the word slowly, as if she were tasting it for the first time. She slipped her hands from my grip. "Did you ever think that maybe there's no such thing as being a woman on the inside?" She tossed the wet thread of floss into the trashcan and rinsed her hands. In the mirror, her eyes caught mine. "Happy Equality Day."