

## FEARS

Pamela Sargent

*A single scientific discovery can effect great changes in our history, as Pamela Sargent shows in this quietly powerful story of a not-very-distant future in which a pill has been perfected that enables parents to choose the sex of their children. What might that ability do to the structure of society?*

*Pamela Sargent has edited the Women of Wonder anthologies, and has written such novels as The Sudden and The Alien Upstairs. Her new novel, Venus of Dreams, will be published this fall.*

I was on my way back to Sam's when a couple of boys tried to run me off the road, banging my fender a little before they sped on, looking for another target. My throat tightened and my chest heaved as I wiped my face with a handkerchief. The boys had clearly stripped their cars of the minimum, ditching all their safety equipment, knowing that the highway patrol was unlikely to stop them; the police had other things to worry about.

The car's harness held me; its dashboard lights flickered. As I waited for it to steer me back onto the road, the engine hummed, choked, and died. I switched over to manual; the engine was silent.

I felt numb. I had prepared myself for my rare journeys into the world outside my refuge, working to perfect my disguise. My angular, coarse-featured face stared back at me from the mirror overhead as I wondered if I could still pass. I had cut my hair recently, my chest was still as flat as a boy's, and the slightly padded shoulders of my suit imparted a bit of extra bulk. I had always been taken for a man before, but I had never done more than visit a few out-of-the-way, dimly lighted stores where the proprietors looked closely only at cards or cash.

I couldn't wait there risking a meeting with the highway patrol. The police might look a little too carefully at my papers and administer a body search on general principles. Stray women had been picked up before, and the rewards for such a discovery were great; I imagined uniformed men groping at my groin, and shuddered. My disguise would get a real test. I took a deep breath, released the harness, then got out of the car.

The garage was half a mile away. I made it there without enduring more than a few honks from passing cars.

The mechanic listened to my husky voice as I described my problem, glanced at my car, took my keys, then left in his tow truck, accompanied by a younger mechanic. I sat in his office out of sight of the other men, trying not to let my fear push me into panic. The car might have to remain here for some time; I would have to find a place to stay. The mechanic might even offer me a lift home, and I didn't want to risk that. Sam might be a bit too talkative in the mechanic's presence; the mechanic might wonder about someone who lived in such an inaccessible spot. My hands were shaking; I thrust them into my pockets.

I started when the mechanic returned to his office, then smiled nervously as he assured me that the car would be ready in a few hours; a component had failed, he had another like it in the shop, no problem. He named a price that seemed excessive; I was about to object, worried an argument might only provoke him, then worried still more that I would look odd if I didn't dicker with him. I settled for frowning as he slipped my card into his terminal, then handed it back to me.

"No sense hanging around here." He waved one beefy hand at the door. "You can pick up a shuttle to town out there, comes by every fifteen minutes or so."

I thanked him and went outside, trying to decide what to do. I had been successful so far; other mechanics didn't even look at me as I walked toward the road. An entrance to the town's underground garage was just across the highway; a small, glassy building with a sign saying "Marcello's" stood next to the entrance. I knew what service Marcello sold; I had driven by the place before. I would be safer with one of his employees, and less conspicuous if I kept moving; curiosity overcame my fear for a moment. I had made my decision.

I walked into Marcello's. One man was at a desk; three big men sat on a sofa near one of the windows, staring at the small holo screen in front of them. I went to the desk and said, "I want to hire a bodyguard."

The man behind the desk looked up; his mustache twitched. "An escort. You want an escort."

"Call it whatever you like."

"For how long?"

"About three or four hours."

"For what purpose?"

"Just a walk through town, maybe a stop for a drink. I haven't been to town for a while, thought I might need some company."

His brown eyes narrowed. I had said too much; I didn't have to explain myself to him. "Card."

I got out my card. He slipped it into his outlet and peered at the screen while I tried to keep from fidgeting, expecting the machine to spit out the card even after all this time. He returned the card. "You'll get your receipt when you come back." He waved a hand at the men on the sofa. "I got three available. Take your pick."

The man on my right had a lean, mean face; the one on the left was sleepy-eyed. "The middle guy."

"Ellis."

The middle man stood up and walked over to us. He was a tall black man dressed in a brown suit; he looked me over, and I forced myself to gaze directly at him while the man at the desk rummaged in a drawer and took out a weapon and holster, handing them to my escort.

"Ellis Gerard," the black man said, thrusting out a hand.

"Joe Segor." I took his hand; he gripped mine just long enough to show his strength, then let go. The two men on the sofa watched us as we left, as if resenting my choice, then turned back to the screen.

We caught a shuttle into town. A few old men sat near the front of the bus under the watchful eyes of the guard; five boys got on behind us, laughing, but a look from the guard quieted them. I told myself again that I would be safe with Ellis.

"Where to?" Ellis said as we sat down. "A visit to a pretty boy? Guys sometimes want escorts for that."

"No, just around. It's a nice day-we could sit in the park for a while."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, Mr. Segor."

"Joe."

"Those crossdressers hang out a lot there now. I don't like it. They go there with their friends and it just causes trouble- it's a bad element. You look at them wrong, and then you get a fight. It ought to be against the law."

"What?"

"Dressing like a woman. Looking like what you're not." He glanced at me. I looked away, my jaw tightening.

We were in town now, moving toward the shuttle's first stop. "Hey!" one of the boys behind us shouted. "Look!" Feet shuffled along the aisle; the boys had rushed to the right side of the bus and were kneeling on the seats, hands pressed against the window; even the guard had turned. Ellis and I got up and changed seats, looking out at what had drawn the boys' attention.

A car was pulling into a spot in front of a store. Our driver put down his magazine and slowed the bus manually; he obviously knew his passengers wanted a look. Cars were not

allowed in town unless a woman was riding in one; even I knew that. We waited. The bus stopped; a group of young men standing outside the store watched the car.

"Come on, get out," a boy behind me said. "Get out of the car."

Two men got out first. One of them yelled at the loiterers, who moved down the street before gathering under a lamp-post. Another man opened the back door, then held out his hand.

She seemed to float out of the car; her long pink robe swirled around her ankles as she stood. Her hair was covered by a long, white scarf. My face grew warm with embarrassment and shame. I caught a glimpse of black eyebrows and white skin before her bodyguards surrounded her and led her into the store.

The driver pushed a button and picked up his magazine again; the bus moved on. "Think she was real?" one of the boys asked.

"I don't know," another replied.

"Bet she wasn't. Nobody would let a real woman go into a store like that. If I had a girl, I'd never let her go anywhere."

"If I had a trans, I'd never let her go anywhere."

"Those trans guys-they got it made." The boys scrambled toward the back of the bus.

"Definitely a trans," Ellis said to me. "I can tell. She's got a mannish kind of face."

I said, "You could hardly see her face."

"I saw enough. And she was too tall." He sighed. "That's the life. A little bit of cutting and some implants, and there you are-you don't have to lift a finger. You're legal female."

"It isn't just a little bit of cutting-it's major surgery."

"Yeah. Well, I couldn't have been a transsexual anyway, not with my body." Ellis glanced at me. "You could have been, though."

"Never wanted it."

"It's not a bad life in some ways."

"I like my freedom." My voice caught on the words.

"That's why I don't like crossdressers. They'll dress like a woman, but they won't turn in one. It just causes trouble- you get the wrong cues."

The conversation was making me uneasy; sitting so close to Ellis, hemmed in by his body and the bus's window, made me feel trapped. The man was too observant. I gritted my teeth and turned toward the window. More stores had been boarded up; we passed a brick school building with shattered windows and an empty playground. The town was declining.

We got off in the business district, where there was still a semblance of normal life. Men in suits came and went from their offices, hopped on buses, strolled toward bars for an early drink.

"It's pretty safe around here," Ellis said as we sat on a bench. The bench had been welded to the ground; it was covered with graffiti and one leg had been warped. Old newspapers lay on the sidewalk and in the gutter with other refuse. One bore a headline about the African war, another, more recent, the latest news about Bethesda's artificial womb program. The news was good; two more healthy children had been born to the project, a boy and a girl. I thought of endangered species and extinction.

A police car drove by, followed by another car with opaque windows. Ellis gazed after the car and sighed longingly, as if imagining the woman inside. "Wish I was gay," he said sadly, "but I'm not. I've tried the pretty boys, but that's not for me. I should have been a Catholic, and then I could have been a priest. I live like one anyway."

"Too many priests already. The Church can't afford any more. Anyway, you'd really be frustrated then. They can't even hear a woman's confession unless her husband or a bodyguard is with her. It's just like being a doctor. You could go nuts that way."

"I'll never make enough to afford a woman, even a trans."

"There might be more women someday," I said. "That project at Bethesda's working out."

"Maybe I should have gone on one of those expeditions. There's one they let into the Philippines, and another one's in Alaska now."

I thought of a team of searchers coming for me. If they were not dead before they reached my door, I would be; I had made sure of that. "That's a shady business, Ellis."

"That group in the Amazon actually found a tribe-killed all the men. No one'll let them keep the women for them-selves, but at least they have enough money to try for one at home." Ellis frowned. "I don't know. Trouble is, a lot of guys don't miss women. They say they do, but they really don't. Ever talk to a real old-timer, one that can remember what it was like?"

"Can't say I have."

Ellis leaned back. "A lot of those guys didn't really like girls all that much. They had plans they'd go to get away from them, things they'd do together. Women didn't think the same way. They didn't act the same-they never did as much as men did." He shaded his eyes for a moment. "I don't know-sometimes one of those old men'll tell you the world was gentler then, or prettier, but I don't know if that's true. Anyway, a lot of those women must have agreed with the men. Look what happened-as soon as you had that pill that could make you sure you had a boy if you wanted, or a girl, most of them started having boys, so they must have thought, deep down, boys were better."

Another police car drove past; one of the officers inside looked us over before driving on. "Take a trans," Ellis said. "Oh, you might envy her a little, but no one really has any respect for her. And the only real reason for having any women around now is for insurance-somebody's got to have the kids, and we can't. But once that Bethesda project really gets going and spreading, we won't need them anymore."

"I suppose you're right."

Four young men, dressed in work shirts and pants, approached us and stared down at us silently. I thought of the boys I had once played with before what I had made a difference before I had been locked away. One young man glanced quickly down the street; another took a step forward. I stared back and made a fist, trying to keep my hand from shaking; Ellis sat up slowly and let his right hand fall to his waist, near his holster. We kept staring until the group turned from us and walked away.

"Anyway, you've got to analyze it." Ellis crossed his legs. "There's practical reasons for having a lot of women around. We need more soldiers-everybody does now, with all the trouble in the world. And police, too, with crime the way it is. And women can't handle those jobs."

"Once people thought they could." My shoulder muscles were tight; I had almost said what

"But they can't. Put a woman up against a man, and the man'll always win." Ellis draped his arm over the back of the bench. "And there's other reasons, too. Those guys in Washington keeping women scarce, having their pick of the choice ones for themselves-it makes their women more valuable. And a lot of the kids'll be theirs, too, from now on. Oh, they might let a woman out to a friend once in a while, and I suppose the womb project'll change things some, but it'll be their world eventually."

"And their genes," I said. I knew that I should change the subject, but Ellis had clearly accepted my pose. In his conversation, the ordinary talk of one man to another, the longest conversation I had had with a man for many years, I was looking for a sign, something to keep me from despairing. "How long can it go on?" I continued. "The population keeps shrinking every year-there won't be enough people soon."

"You're wrong, Joe. Machines do a lot of the work now anyway, and there used to be too many people. The only way we'll ever have more women is if someone finds out the Russians are having more, and that won't happen-they need soldiers, too. Besides, look at it this way-maybe we're doing women a favor if there aren't as many of them. Would you want to be a woman, having to be married by sixteen, not being able to go anywhere, no job until she's at least sixty-five?"

And no divorce without a husband's permission, no contra-ception, no higher education. The special privileges and protections could not make up for that. "No," I said to Ellis. "I wouldn't want to be one." Yet I knew that many women had made their peace with the world as it was, extorting gifts and tokens from their men, glorying in their beauty and their pregnancies, lavishing their attention on their children and their homes, tormenting and manipulating their men with the sure knowledge that any woman could find another man-for if a woman could get a divorce by herself, a man more powerful than her husband could force him to give her one if he wanted her himself.

I had dreamed of guerrillas, of fighting women too proud to give in, breeding strong daughters by a captive male to carry on the battle. But if there were such women, they, like the men, had gone to ground. The world had been more merciful when it had drowned or strangled us at birth.

Once, when I was younger, someone had said it had been a conspiracy-develop a foolproof way to give a couple a child of the sex they wanted, and most of them would naturally choose boys. The population problem would be solved in time without having to resort to harsher methods, and a blow would be leveled at those old feminists who had demanded too much, trying to emasculate men in the process. But I didn't think it had been a conspiracy. It had simply happened, as it was bound to eventually, and the values of society had controlled behavior. After all, why shouldn't a species decide to become one sex, especially if reproduction could be severed from sexuality? People had believed men were better, and acted on that belief. Perhaps women, given the power, would have done the same.

We retreated to a bar when the sunny weather grew cooler. Elli\*steered me away from the taverns with "bad elements," and we found ourselves in the doorway of a darkened bar in which several old and middle-aged men had gathered and two pretty boys dressed in leather and silk were plying their trade.

I glanced at the newscreen as I entered; the pale letters flickered, telling me that Bob Arnoldi's last appeal had failed and that he would be executed at the end of the month. This was no surprise; Arnoldi had, after all, killed a woman, and was always under heavy guard. The letters danced on; the President's wife had given birth to her thirteenth child, a boy. The President's best friend, a California millionaire, had been at his side when the announcement was made; the million-aire's power could be gauged by the fact that he had been married three times, and that the prolific First Lady had been one of the former wives.

Ellis and I got drinks at the bar. I kept my distance from one of the pretty boys, who scooped me up at my short, wavy hair and nestled closer to his patron. We retreated to the shadows and sat down at one of the side tables. The table top was sticky; old cigar butts had been planted on it, and a small gray mound in the ashtray. I sipped my bourbon; Ellis, while on the job, was only allowed beer.

The men at the bar were watching the remaining minutes of a football game. Sports of some kind were always on holo screens in bars, according to Sam; he preferred the old porno-graphic films that were sometimes shown amid war coverage and an occasional boy choir performance for the pederasts and the more culturally inclined. Ellis looked at the screen and noted that his team was losing; I commented on the team's weaknesses, as I knew I was expected to do.

Ellis rested his elbows on the table. "This all you came for? Just to walk around and the have a drink?"

"That's it. I'm just waiting for my car." I tried to sound nonchalant. "It should be fixed soon."

"Doesn't seem like enough reason to hire an escort."

"Come on, Ellis. Guys like me would have trouble without escorts, especially if we don't know the territory that well."

"True. You don't look that strong." He peered at me a little too intently. "Still, unless you were looking for action, or going to places with a bad element, or waiting for the gangs to come out at night, you could get along. It's in your attitude-you have to look like you can take care of yourself. I've seen guys smaller than you I wouldn't want to fight."

"I like to be safe."

He watched me, as if expecting me to say more.

"Actually, I don't need an escort as much as I like to have a companion-somebody to talk to. I don't see that many people."

"It's your money."

The game had ended and was being subjected to loud analysis by the men at the bar; the voices suddenly died. A man behind me sucked in his breath as the clear voice of a woman filled the room.

I looked at the holo. Rena Swanson was reciting the news, leading with the Arnoldi story following that with the announcement of the President's new son. Her aged, wrinkled face



hovered over us; her kind brown eyes promised us comfort. Her motherly presence had made her program one of the most popular on the holo. The men around me sat silently, faces upturned, worshipping her—the Woman, the Other, someone for whom part of them still yearned.

We got back to Marcello's just before dark. As we approached the door, Ellis suddenly clutched my shoulder. "Wait a minute, Joe."

I didn't move at first; then I reached out and carefully pushed his arm away. My shoulder hurt and a tension headache, building all day, had finally taken hold, its claws gripping my temples. "Don't touch me." I had been about to plead, but caught myself in time; attitude, as Ellis had told me himself, was important.

"There's something about you. I can't figure you out."

"Don't try." I kept my voice steady. "You wouldn't want me to complain to your boss, would you? He might not hire you again. Escorts have to be trusted."

He was very quiet. I couldn't see his dark face clearly in the fading light, but I could sense that he was weighing the worth of a confrontation with me against the chance of losing his job. My face was hot, my mouth dry. I had spent too much time with him, given him too many chances to notice subtly wrong gestures. I continued to stare directly at him, wondering if his greed would win out over practicality.

"Okay," he said at last, and opened the door.

I was charged more than I had expected to pay, but did not argue about the fee. I pressed a few coins on Ellis; he took them while refusing to look at me. He knows, I thought then; he knows and he's letting me go. But I might have imagined that, seeing kindness where there was none.

\* \* \*

I took a roundabout route back to Sam's, checking to make sure no one had followed me, then pulled off the road to change the car's license plate, concealing my own under my shirt.

Sam's store stood at the end of the road, near the foot of my mountain. Near the store, a small log cabin had been built. I had staked my claim to most of the mountain, buying up the land to make sure it remained undeveloped, but the outside world was already moving closer.

Sam was sitting behind the counter, drumming his fingers as music blared. I cleared my throat and said hello.

"Joe?" His watery blue eyes squinted. "You're late, boy."

"Had to get your car fixed. Don't worry-I paid for it already. Thanks for letting me rent it again." I counted out my coins and pressed them into his dry, leathery hand.

"Any time, son." The old man held up the coins, peering at each one with his weak eyes. "Don't look like you'll get home tonight. You can use the sofa there-I'll get you a nightshirt."

"I'll sleep in my clothes." I gave him an extra coin.

He locked up, hobbled toward his bedroom door, then turned. "Get into town at all?"

"No." I paused. "Tell me something, Sam. You're old enough to remember. What was it really like before?" I had never asked him in all the years I had known him, avoiding intimacy of any kind, but suddenly I wanted to know.

"I'll tell you, Joe." He leaned against the doorway. "It wasn't all that different. A little softer around the edges, maybe, quieter, not as mean, but it wasn't all that different. Men always ran everything. Some say they didn't, but they had all the real power-sometimes they'd dole a little of it out to the girls, that's all. Now we don't have to anymore."

I had been climbing up the mountain for most of the morning, and had left the trail, arriving at my decoy house before noon. Even Sam believed that the cabin in the clearing was my dwelling. I tried the door, saw that it was still locked, then continued on my way.

My home was farther up the slope, just out of sight of the cabin. I approached my front door which was almost invisible near the ground; the rest of the house was concealed under slabs of rock and piles of deadwood. I stood still, letting a hidden camera lens get a good look at the door. The door swung open.

"Thank God you're back," Julia said as she pulled me inside and closed the door. "I was worried. I thought you'd been caught and they were coming for me."

"It's all right. I had some trouble with Sam's car, that's all."

She looked up at me; the lines around her mouth deepened. "I wish you wouldn't go." I took off the pack loaded with the tools and supplies unavailable at Sam's store. Julia glanced at the pack resentfully. "It isn't worth it."

"You're probably right." I was about to tell her of my own trip into town, but decided to wait until later.

We went into the kitchen. Her hips were wide under her pants; her large breasts bounced as she walked. Her face was still pretty, even after all the years of hiding, her lashes thick and curly, her mouth delicate. Julia could not travel in the world as it was; no clothing, no disguise could hide her.

I took off my jacket and sat down, taking out my card, and my papers. My father had given them to me-the false name, the misleading address, the identification of a male-after I had pleaded for my own life. He had built my hideaway; he had risked everything for me. Give the world a choice, he had said, and women will be the minority, maybe even die out completely; perhaps we can only love those like ourselves. He had looked hard as he said it, and then he had patted me on the head, sighing as though he regretted the choice. Maybe he had. He had chosen to have a daughter, after all.

I remembered his words. "Who knows?" he had asked. "What is it that made us two kinds of people who have to work together to get the next batch going? Oh, I know about evolution, but it doesn't have to be that way, or any way. It's curious."

"It can't last," Julia said, and I did not know if she meant the world, or our escape from this world.

There would be no Eves in their Eden, I thought. The visit to town had brought it all home to me. We all die, but we go with a conviction about the future; my extinction would not be merely personal. Only traces of the feminine would linger-an occasional expression, a posture, a feeling-in the flat-breasted male form. Love would express itself in fruitless unions, divorced from reproduction; human affections are flexible.

I sat in my home, in my prison, treasuring the small freedom I had, the gift of a man, as if it seemed such freedom had always been for those like me, and wondered again if it could have been otherwise.