

## **Introduction**

Today I'm a dork. Most days, probably seven out of every ten, I'm just a geek. And occasionally I'm a nerd, especially when I'm deep into my research. But today is definitely a 'dork' day.

I was running late this morning and while juggling several large textbooks and an equally large travel mug of coffee, I realized my keys were not on the hook by the door. I'm a little flaky and I know if I don't put my keys in the same place every single time, I end up wasting half an hour searching, usually when I can afford it the least. So here I am, running around the house, half a bagel hanging out of my mouth, trying to find my stupid keys. As a last resort (which is of course, the most likely place, you know) I opened the refrigerator and there they were, sitting between the sour cream and last night's leftover pizza. I've stopped trying to solve those little mysteries in my life, so I just grabbed them, my mug, my books and headed out the door. Finally.

Morning classes ran smoothly, then came my lunch break. I made my way to the cafeteria, grabbed a tray, some silverware and a napkin. Sliding the plastic along the metal bars, I chose a grilled cheese sandwich (my go-to meal), an apple and a bag of Cheetos. Diet Coke rounds out my very healthy midday meal, for which I pay, then turn to look for a table. Thinking I'd hit the jackpot because my favorite table by the window overlooking the tiny rose garden is available, I take two steps when suddenly I'm flat on my back looking up at the ceiling tiles.

The buzz in the cafeteria completely stopped. Nothing like watching someone fall on a banana peel (how much more cliché can you get?) to end a conversation. I'm still not entirely sure what happened, when I hear, "Lizzie! Are you okay?"

And it has to be the heartthrob of the computer department, Dr. Stephen Barlowe. I'm not one for a lot of crushes or anything, but this guy is gorgeous. Why do the heavenly ones always have to see me in my most mortal moments?

"Yes, I'm fine. Just need to dust off my pride a bit," I say, trying to smile. He picks up my tray and starts collecting the scattered remnants of my lunch, while I regain my composure. Luckily, the noise level has risen again in the room and I don't feel like I'm in the spotlight any longer. "Thanks, Stephen. I think the Cheetos are still edible, so I'll just hide out in the corner and salvage what's left of my dignity." He excuses himself and I turn to find the table that started the whole mess was now occupied by a young couple holding hands and giggling. Figures.

And the frosting on the cake was when I got home that evening and put on my pajamas, I realized that I'd spent the entire day sporting a sticker down the leg of my new pants announcing to the world that I was a size 8.

Now that you've seen a typical day in my life, I should probably introduce myself. I was christened Elizabeth Marie Mayhew, but I'm known to my friends and family as 'Lizzie'. I'm sure you're thinking that with the level of social awkwardness and the eating habits portrayed in the story I just told you, that I must be at the height of my high school career, but I'm not. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old assistant

professor in the Computer and Math Department at Browden Polytechnic Institute, a small university in the Midwest. I'm working on my doctorate and teaching basic computer programming. I come home to an apartment I share with my cat, Moffit. Yes, that's a Battlestar Galactica: Classic reference; thus you can see why I consider myself a geek of the first order.

My life is good. I had a great childhood, love my family, love my best friend, Beth, who you'll definitely get a chance to meet, and I love Jesus. Now, if you're still interested, let's move on to my most unconventional love story.

## Chapter 1 : My Decision

After putting on my comfy pjs and facing the realization that my dorkiness was bordering on terminal, I decided to stage my own intervention. I picked up my replica Star Trek communicator phone (I don't really have one, that's a joke) and dialed Beth.

"Hi. It's time." I have no need to mince words with the one who shares the other half of my brain.

She squealed so loudly on the other end that I had to pull the phone away from my ear. "Really? I mean, you're really sure this time?"

"Absolutely. You won't believe the day I've had. Well, you've known me long enough that you probably would believe it, but still, I've had it. It's time to do something about me."

See, Beth has been after me since we graduated to "do something" with myself. She wants me to be her makeover project. We've done little things like try to put me in high heels (I twisted my ankle) and risking a permanent wave in my stick-straight hair (I looked like a mushroom cloud for about six weeks).

But she's my oldest, dearest friend and she won't give up on me, even if I seem hopeless so many times. Somehow we became best friends in junior high and although we are night and day, we've stayed that way through everything. She went to college for a few years, but found herself a great guy, got married and is happy as a stay-at-home-mom. I apparently couldn't get enough of school, but she was more than ready to get her MRS and be done with it.

"Alright, Lizzie. I'll get to work on my list of what we're going to do to you, I mean *for* you, and this weekend we'll get started. Oh, this is going to be so much fun!" I could hear her clapping her hands like a toddler and it was making me nervous.

"Okay. This time I'm really taking the plunge. I'm through with being me!"

"Now, honey, let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. You are wonderful. We just want to make you more wonderful. In a slightly less geeky way. And with better hair. And maybe some makeup. So don't think of this as starting over. It's just another step along the way to being a more complete you."

"Whatever happened to being 'fearfully and wonderfully made'? Doesn't God love me the way I am?" I love to play devil's advocate in these kinds of conversations. This isn't the first time we've had this one.

Beth sighed. "Paul wrote that we are changed from 'glory into glory', right? Haven't you ever heard the saying that 'God loves me too much to leave me where I am'? Just leave things to me, girlfriend, and we'll get you fixed up in no time at all. Get some sleep or go play on your computer or do whatever it is you do to relax and we'll talk about it later. Love you!"

We hung up and I lay back on my pillow to think. Did I really hate who I was? Certainly not. But I think I was just a little tired of me. I'd always loved that Ethan Hawk line in Before Sunrise where he says

something about going bowling, but wouldn't you sometimes just like to leave yourself at home? I guess I'd just like to go out without me, that's all.

I should pray, I thought. So I prayed. I started with my usual laundry list of "bless my mom and dad and my brother and his family and my sister," but this time I added a fervent plea for myself: "Please just help me know what's best for me." Amen.



The rest of the week hummed right along. No more size stickers. No more banana peels. And no more being rescued by Prince Charming. I'm not sure if I was relieved by that or not.

I graded mid-terms. I did some research. I played on my computer. I watched a full season of MST3K on DVD just to get myself through until Saturday, which was quickly approaching and which I was beginning to fear. I knew Beth and I wasn't sure that I wasn't in for something like I'd seen on Extreme Makeover: This-time-it's-Personal Edition. She may be small, but she's tough and I knew that although I'd held her off this long, if she really wanted something, I was going to cave in like a house of cards. And I worried that afterwards I might not be able to put myself back together.

At 7:30am Saturday morning, I was roused from bed by incessant knocking at the door. I figured we wouldn't start my transformation until at least 10am, when normal people start their use of oxygen on a given Saturday, so I'd stayed up late playing RuneScape. Bleary-eyed, I shoved Moffitt off the bed and shuffled to the door.

"Wake up, sleepyhead!" She blasted her way through the door, hauling a rolling suitcase behind her and handing me a cardboard drink tray from Starbucks. "I knew you'd need a pick-me-up, so I picked these up on the way!" She giggled at her own clever word play and made herself at home. As Beth curled up on the couch with her triple white chocolate mocha, my roommate plopped down on Beth's lap for a scratch. Beth could never resist and complied with the unspoken request absentmindedly.

"Do you know where I want to start?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "Haircuts at LeCurl. I'm ready for a new look, too, so I booked us both for cuts and facials at 10am. I couldn't get anything earlier, but that's okay, because we'll have plenty of time to do a 'What Not To Wear'-style trashing party." Beth looked me right in the eye. "You know I've been waiting years for the chance to burn that ugly denim sack dress that you keep wearing with those horrid sandals and the day has finally arrived!" She stood up so fast Moffitt fell on the floor, her arms outstretched in victory.

"You should really switch to decaf," I said, sullenly. I was excited, but apprehensive. What if this experiment in transformation resulted in the exact same me that it has every time I've tried it? Okay, so I've never gone this extreme before, but didn't someone say that doing the same thing over and over and

expecting a different result is the exact definition of insanity? Maybe I don't need a makeover; maybe I need a shrink.

Beth handed me my usual half-caf hazelnut latte, knowing that I was just in a funk because of the rude awakening she'd given me. She also knew that a latte always sweetens me up, so she was willing to wait. But only for a minute.

"Let's go!" she exclaimed after my second sip. I hadn't seen her this excited since the time that her little Olivia had gone potty on the potty all by herself. I didn't realize I'd be in the same league as that particular milestone. I felt strangely flattered.

I allowed myself to be dragged to the bedroom I'd just left where I sank onto the goose down pillows as she flung open the accordion door to my closet. "Yikes!" Beth screamed. "It's no wonder I never asked to borrow anything from you!"

"Ha, ha," I retorted, wittily. I had put myself up for this, I thought. Now let her be Stacy London if she wants to be. How bad can it get?

But that was when Beth started flinging clothes out of the closet like they've been worn to a leper colony and making comments like, "When was that EVER in style?" and "Who died and left you this old thing?"

How come I'd never noticed this obnoxious side of her before? I tried not to protest too much, since she's mostly right about my taste in clothing, but occasionally I had to grimace. My favorite jeans? Really? Granted, they didn't do anything for my figure, but they were comfortable. And now she's holding my favorite Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt! Yes, the crewneck is torn and threadbare and the sleeves are all stretched out, but it's my lucky shirt. I'm not really superstitious, but I'm just sure they'll never make it to a Superbowl (Favre or no Favre) if she throws out that sweatshirt!

After only ten minutes of frantic clothes-strewing, she was finished and the pile to keep was considerably smaller than the mountain to give away. Beth had to make a few comments about even the poor having a little pride, which I ignored and pulled on something from the "keep" pile.

"Am I allowed to wear this?" I asked sarcastically.

"Well," she said, "I had to leave you something, since I refuse to be seen at the mall with a Lady Godiva. It's all a matter of relativity. This," pointing to the small mound of clothing, "is *relatively* better than that." Then she smiled in a most irritating fashion. "Isn't this fun?"

"I'll let you know."

I sighed. "This is harder than I thought. Am I doing this for the right reasons? Do I even know the reasons? What am I expecting?"

"Look, honey, let's not get too philosophical about it yet. We're talking a haircut and some new clothes. The rest will come in time. First comes a foundation of confidence," she says, starting to tick off this list

on her fingers, “which will lead directly to the most wonderful accessory of all—a handsome man on your arm—then a wedding dress, then—“

“Stop right there. Who said this is about a man? I’m doing alright by myself. I’ve got Moffitt, so I’m not really alone. I love having the place to myself. I don’t have to fight anyone else for the computer when I wasn’t to play RuneScape for an hour or two. I like my routine.” Even I could tell I was starting to protest too much.

“Do you remember what you said to me after Debbie’s wedding last summer? When we’d been bridesmaids for the third time in six months? After you threatened to throw me into the chocolate fountain? You said and I quote, ‘Even with the craziness and headaches that come with a wedding, I have to admit that I wish that were me.’ End quote. You’re ready to get out there, my dear. And I’m going to make it happen.” Beth giggled again and hugged me. “My baby’s growing up!”

## **Chapter 2 : The Transformation**

Opening the door to LeCurl, we were greeted (or “assaulted” in my opinion) by the overwhelming aroma of permanent solution, eight different kinds of shampoo, and patchouli with just a hint of espresso from the deli next door. Music pouring from the speakers hidden in the textured walls reminded me of a sitar or some other exotic stringed instrument with which I was not familiar. The whole ambience wasn’t really my cup of tea, but this was all about moving me from boring Lipton in a chipped mug to fun-loving Darjeeling in bone china, right? Get over it, Lizzie, and just enjoy yourself.

“Hello!” said a sing-song, high-pitched warble from behind the granite countertop. “You must be Lizzie and Beth! Lizzie Beth! How cute is that?” Like we’d never heard that one before, I thought. In high school we were practically known by that one phrase. “I’m Willow,” she continued to gush. “And this is Brandy. We’re going to take care of you ladies today. Does anyone need a bottle of spring water? Organic coffee? Green tea? No? Just let us know when you do!”

Willow’s figure fit her moniker so perfectly that I wondered if her parents had set her path in motion the moment they bestowed it upon her. Hmm. That’s an interesting notion. What if I named my child ‘Rebel’ would he be more of a handful than if I name him ‘Docile’. Good heavens...no point in spending time worry about your children’s personalities just yet, you think?

I followed Willow to a chair in the salon and sat down. She immediately started pulling at my hair, running her fingers through it, trying to coax a little volume. Good luck, lady, I thought. I’d never gotten so much as a wave in my straight hair and I’d given up trying for it at about age 16. Since then, I’d spent my time with shoulder length, medium brown, shapeless, straight hair, no bangs, 90% of the time held back in a ponytail by a plain rubber band. Why bother fussing with it, when it won’t do any good? That’s been my motto. But I have a feeling that I’m going to have to do a revision to that one. I’ll keep thinking of a suitable replacement.

“Now I think we should go with a smooth bang, shape it up around your face and give you some gorgeous auburn highlights. What do you think?” She was playing with my hair like I was a baby doll and she was a preschooler playing mommy.

“Sure. You’re the professional. I’m leaving it up to you.” I hoped I knew what I was doing. Even more importantly, I hoped Willow knew what she was doing. Her hair was long and beautiful, with cascades of waves like I imagine a modern-day Rapunzel might enjoy. Would she be able to handle my puddle-of-mud hair?

Glancing over at Beth in the chair across the room where she and Brandy were chatting it up like old friends, I had to admit that this place held a certain charm. I relaxed a little, let Willow do the talking, and decided then and there not to protest anything. Not even once.



Six hours later, I was sitting in Olive Garden, surrounded by shopping bags. Beth stepped out to call Mike and check on Olivia, so I stopped to take a breath and evaluate the course the day had taken.

I took out my handbag mirror and studied my reflection. I had to admit that Willow was a genius. She'd taken my mousy brown hair and turned it into something more luscious than I could have hoped for. The color was beautiful, the cut was fabulous and if I can learn how to properly use the \$50 worth of product that I ended up buying, then I was on my way to something bordering on average!

I was still stupidly grinning at myself, when Beth slid in to the booth across from me. "So, you like? Just admit it. I was right that you needed a change." She looked over the rim of her iced tea glass smugly.

"Yes. You were right. I think I look a little like Jean Grey." At her blank expression I added, "From X-Men? Never mind. But what does this really change? I'm still me! You know I'm still going to walk around bumping into things. I'm still going to make references to movies no one else has seen, and tell bad math jokes that nobody else gets. Can I still be me and expect to gain a real social life?"

Our waiter came to take our order. As soon as he walked off, Beth leaned over the table, excitedly, and grabbed my arm. "Did you see him? Totally checked you out!"

"Who? Where? No way, Beth." I paused. He was a nice-looking guy, but I guess I didn't notice. "Really?"

"Ooh, we've got farther to go than I thought. Do you not know when a man notices you? Mercy, Lizzie, you spend your day at a school that has a 7:1 ratio of male to female students, with a faculty ratio that is even higher and you don't know how to tell if a man likes you?" She slapped her forehead. "I better call Mike and tell him he's watching Olivia all weekend! We have some serious work to do!"