The Paramedic

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I have tried to think back – right back – to try to work out why I am the person I am. I feel that I can do that now. I never could before.

I was born Matthew Barclay although for as long as I can remember people called me “Mutt”. My mother was religious but my father was not. My mother kept talking about people having a path laid out for them, but I never saw it. She also talked a lot about doing good, and I guess that was how I became a paramedic. There is no better help that you can give a person than saving their life.

Not everybody felt that way. I attended suicides or sometimes older people who would plead with me: “Please just let me die”. I could never do that. My job was to keep them alive. Choices on care are for doctors. I suppose I also had my mother’s voice in my ear about sin, but for me it was more about the call being somebody else’s to make.

I have tried to pinpoint feelings of being not like the others when I was at school. I really cannot recall anything more than that I wanted to fit in and do everything the same as everybody else. If I had thoughts that seemed odd it seems quite probable that I pushed them aside. I had a good bunch of friends and what they thought was what I thought; what they did, I did.

I don’t think any of that is strange. Most people in the world are shaped by their surroundings and get their view of the world from others. Kids don’t sit down and ask questions about themselves. In fact, even when you grow up you might not have time for that. You just go on as you have been going, until something happens to change everything.

What I did know when I was young was that I wanted to help people. At school I volunteered to help with first aid. I had thought that I might be a doctor, but I was never that smart. There are other healthcare careers but the idea of Emergency Medicine was exciting.

I did think about joining the army to get my training and experience, but the idea of being a non-combatant belongs in the movies. I looked into and ruled it out. I paid for my training, and I am glad I did. Ex-military medics come to us ill equipped to deal with the weak or the aged or the impaired, and that is most of our work.

We see a lot of tragedy. It gets to you after a while. It is not just the grief of others that you have to deal with but the frustration of witnessing the same thing over and over again. If it is drug abuse or vehicle accidents or suicide, the same thing keeps on happening and nobody does anything.

We had support. I was told that depression was part of the job. You can quit or you can take some drugs to help you through, or you can just tell yourself that if you are not doing this - who will? Do you want to ask somebody else to do what you do when you know that you are good at it? Depression seems selfish – and it is.

But depression defies logic. You have it or you don’t, and if you have it no amount of logic can reason you out of it. The best way to cope is to focus on what you do. Keep healthy and keep busy and you can keep it at bay. It may not leave you but it will be just behind, not in front blocking your way.

Then one night I attended a suicide attempt. I was told that the victim was in the kitchen on the table, where family were attempting resuscitation. When I came in my first reaction was that this was a very attractive young woman with long dark hair, barely breathing. But everybody was referring to him as “he”. It was only when I accessed the bare chest that I understood.

I used an adrenalin shot and an emetic to try to get any of the pills out of the stomach. I had a portable pump too, but the drugs did the job. Still, procedure calls for hospital treatment and that the patient is conscious until then, so I rode in the back with “Bobbi”.

She (and I will always refer to her that way) was semi conscious but talking constantly. She explained that she had started turning up at school dressed as a girl, leaving early and changing at a friends. At school she had girl friends who were supportive, and one had been able to secure drugs to delay her male puberty. She also had a boy who had treated her as a girl until he had only just found out the truth. Now the school had called her parents “to discuss Roberta’s transition” and the shit had hit the fan. They were going to cut her hair and force her to go through a male sexual maturity. Her life could have been everything she wanted, but now it was going to be hell.

I asked her whether she had any support, and she asked me to call someone. She had remembered the phone number, so I wrote it down and I agreed to call this person once she was stable.

Once I had handed on the vitals and the gurney had been wheeled away, I turned as I always do. As I said – keep healthy and keep busy – back in the bus and back on the road. Sure sometimes people look you up and thank you, but as often as not when you hear the words: “Thanks Mutt, we’ve got this now” you know that they have and you job is over. But I had that phone number, and I decided that I would call it in the morning.

Before I did, I phoned the hospital to ask about the patient. I do that sometimes, usually if the patent is close to death when I watch the gurney disappear. It is like job feedback – did my work save a life? If not, I need to know if there was something I could have done better. I knew Bobbi would be Okay and the ER Duty Nurse confirmed it.

I called the number. She said her name was Suzanne, but it was a deep voice. I could guess that she was trans. In my job these people were not unknown to me, in particular in the red-light district.

“I need to know everything,” she said. “But I can’t talk now. Are you free for lunch? If you are then lunch is free for you. I own a café on Bromley Street. Around 1:30?”

I hardly had time to say no, but I had another evening shift that that would work. It seemed like every lunch I ate I pulled out of plastic so sitting down for a meal sounded good. A free one even better. I could get some sleep before lunch.

I figured that I would know the woman that I spoke to when I arrived there. She would be the one who looked like a guy. But there were three women working the café and I could see two in the kitchen and they all looked like they could have been Suzanne. I asked. She appeared from out back.

She was tall and looked strong, but she moved with grace – not like a man. Her hair was quite short and blond. Her face was attractive, or maybe it was just the smile and sparkling eyes that made her seem that way.

She ushered me to a table and recommended the Caesar salad with grilled chicken. She sat across from me, and asked about Bobbi.

“She seems to be successfully living as a young woman, but her parents didn’t know,” I said. “A male pubescence will be a big problem for her. There is no going back from that.”

“Do we know it,” she said. “I bet you wish you could go back and avoid it. I certainly do.”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted. “You seem to think that I am one of her trans-friends. No, I was just the paramedic in attendance.”

“But being trans would allow you to empathize I am sure.”

“But I am not trans,” I said.

“You poor thing,” said Suzanne. “You most certainly are!”

“Honestly, I was just trying to do the right thing,” I explained. “She was worried that her parents might force her into something, I guess. She was looking for your support, and …”.

She held up a large, manicured hand. “You have heard of gaydar? Well, I have transdar,” she said. “I know what you are, even if you don’t.”

“Look, I just wanted to say that I think she needs some support,” I said. “Bobbi I mean.” Who else was there?” “She needs somebody to talk to the doctors and just make sure that they know what she wants. What she is. Why she did what she did. That her parents might have another agenda.”

“That sounds great. Of course I will be there for Bobbi. You should come with me. I could be there for you too.”

I started to wonder if this was some kind of joke being played on me, but the circumstances were very serious and so was Suzanne.

“What makes you think that I am trans?” I said. It almost sounded like a confession – that I had been found out. Why?

“You have a hole in you,” she said. “My guess is that you wanted to be like your mother. I take it that she has passed? She had strong views and she was quite beautiful. You wanted to be like her.”

Could it be true? She was beautiful. I loved to watch her doing her makeup. She had beautiful skin and beautiful hair, before the cancer or the treatment for it, took it away from her. I did admire her, although she had done nothing of substance as I recall, except be beautiful and be there.

“My mother died recently,” I said. “My father is still alive.”

My father. I never wanted to be like him. He was driven. He worked even as she died. But he was not a giver like my mother. I wanted to be a giver. I wanted to help people. I wanted to save lives. Yes I wanted to be like my mother in that way, but not be beautiful. I could never be that.

“You could be a beautiful woman,” said Suzanne. It was like she was reading my mind.

“You’re crazy,” I said, but it seemed as if I might be. The accusation just sounded sad.

“Why don’t you let the girls give you a makeover,” she said, waving her hand in the direction of the counter. “It can be private. Lunch trade finishes in an hour. We can do it upstairs. What do you have to lose? If I am crazy, then that will be proved and I will go to see Bobbi after we are done. Otherwise, we might go together?”

I found myself thinking about my relationship with my mother. I vaguely recalled her putting some lipstick on my lips while I stood by her dressing table. I recalled that the odd thoughts that I had at school were when I watched the girls playing with each other. But there was always somebody who would shout out: “Hey Mutt – come over and play ball!”

But she was waiting for an answer, and I had not yet said “No way!” Why?

“Nothing to lose,” she repeated.

What did I say to her? I cannot even remember that. I remember that she called over “the girls” one by one and they met me and welcomed me. I realized that since school I had really been a loner, or maybe I was one even then. I was in a team at work too. It was a tight team. It has to be in emergency medicine. I belonged there, but it was not like this kind of camaraderie. This was different.

Even before they had shut down the café for the afternoon break (they were open nights too) two of the girls had taken me upstairs to the apartment above the café where Suzanne lived with others. There were dressing tables in each room from what I could see, but in the living room was a chair which was clearly used for hair and makeup. I recognized many of the things on the side table from my mother’s dressing table. Somehow that seemed to reassure me.

The chair looked out into the living room. There was no mirror except the full length mrro near the door facing away from me. I had no idea what was being done to me. I just let it happen. They said that they would style my hair a little but not color it, and they would cut it if I did not like what they had done.

They had all come upstairs by the time they were applying the makeup. There were suggestions and active contributions, and plenty of oohing and aaahing. Then finally the invitation…

“Walk over to the mirror. Have a look at the real you.”

I walked over, looking straight ahead so that I could turn into the mirror and perhaps burst out laughing. What a strange way to spend the afternoon, I might say. But as I turned she turned. And there she was. It was me. As they said, the real me.

It seems so hard to understand it now. Not that her presence did not fill the gap in my life, but that I had ignored that gap for so long. I had pretended that it did not exist. More than that, it now seems the answer to my problems was there all along and that I never knew it.

Since that day I have never suffered from depression. Even back at work I found that my outlook was so different. I think men of ideals want to solve the world’s problems, where women of ideals handle what it in front of them, and hope that the world will get better.

But in that moment, with my hair curled and sprayed into volume, and with my face made up like a runway model, it seemed that the man had left the room, if he ever had been there. I was a woman surrounded by other women – not complete perhaps – but women.

“We have a body stocking and a dress, but legs and arms will need to be shaved immediately!” I think it was Suzanne. It was a fog. “And shoes. Don’t worry – a heel that you should find easy.”

“People will see that I am not a real woman,” I complained.

“Honey, welcome to TG world!” This time it definitely was Suzanne looking over my shoulder at our reflections. “But sometimes it is a good to be recognized as being a transwoman. Especially now. We are going to the hospital.”

It seemed incredible that a only a few hours after a man walked into that café, a woman walked out, and that woman was me. Even more incredible was the feeling that I was not pretending. I had discovered something about myself – life up until that point had been a pretense. If I wanted to stop pretending, then I could.

We arrived at the hospital. Bobbi had her parents there. The moment we walked in, her father said: “Oh look Rob, two of your tranny friends have turned up.”

I have to say it – I lost it a bit, perhaps as women sometimes do? I said: “Perhaps you don’t remember me sir, but last night as I wheeled your child out of you home semi-conscious, you thanked me for saving her life and made me promise to see her looked after. Well I am keeping that promise to you. I am here to see that there will be no more suicide attempts; to see that she knows that she has support; to tell her that she can be the woman she is inside; to tell her that a parent’s love will win over prejudice in the end … sooner or later is up to you.”

Those may not have been the words, and I may have spluttered a little, but the message got through.

Suzanne just said to him: “Your daughter is simply so gorgeous. Lying in a hospital bed she would put most beauty queens to shame. You should be a proud father.”

Bobbi squeezed my hand. She whispered in my ear: “I had a feeling that you might be like me. That is why I went on the way I did …”.

It was as if I was the last person to know.

Like I said, only now can I think back. Why am I the person I am, and how could I not realize it?

I turned up for work that afternoon as Maggie. I never went back to Mutt. As last I was happy and every day on my journey (bar one or two) has been even happier.

Bobbi has agreed to be my bridesmaid next week. It will be a good rehearsal for her own wedding in the fall. Suzanne will be master of ceremonies at my wedding. My husband-to-be is right on board with that. They get on so well.

I am loving my work as I never did before but he would like me to give up if the adoption comes through. He has three children of his own which we share with his ex-wife, but he wants me to be a mother from the beginning. I just hope that I can be the example to my own child that my mother was.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2021

*Erin’s seed (just the beginning): Matt "Mutt" Barclay is an EMT and sometimes he gets depressed. He attended a suicide by a transgirl who seemed to have succeeded in getting what she wanted but was not accepted by her boyfriend and family - it hits him very strangely …*