The Translator

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I was furious that the agency had made such a mistake, but somehow, I found it hard to express my anger to him. He seemed small and harmless, but he was still a man. I had been very precise in my instructions: We were a group of women speaking to female Muslim refugees about women’s’ issues – our interpreter had to be a woman.

“I am an excellent translator,” he said. I never doubted it. It was just that he was male.

“From the time that I was very young I started translating for US forces in my hometown,” he said, by way of explaining how a man as young as he could have acquired his skills.

I explained the problem. It was evident that he was downcast. He needed the work, as he said it. He doubted that there was a woman who could fill the role. He said that I was their best option.

But it was not an option. We would be discussing intimate issues. Culturally there were problems, but even putting that aside I would never have allowed a man in the room. Men were a large part of the problem. How could we expect a frank and open discussion with one of them sitting among us.

“It is out of the question,” I said, with genuine sympathy. It was a sympathy that surprised me, given that I was addressing a man.

“I could become a woman,” he said. It was just blurted out but accompanied with a stare that unsettled me. It was determined, but somehow sad, and if recalling an old injury. It was a stare that I recognized on the face of many women, the moment that they disclosed past abuse.

“Your enthusiasm is to be commended,” I said. “But no, you cannot.”

“I was once,” he said. “I was *bache bazi*, if you know what that is?”

I did not, and that must have been apparent.

“Your soldiers rescued me,” he explained. “Back in Afghanistan boys are dressed as girls to entertain men. I was one of them. I was an expert. I try to do any task as well as anyone can. I was a girl, so everybody said. I could be again.”

He had a wispy beard that marked him as male, but otherwise I could see just what a pretty girl he might have been. His hair was quite long and full, shiny and black like his big eyes and eyelashes.

But the idea seemed revolting. I have been a lesbian all my life, and I find men dressed as women disgusting. But as I said, there was a tenderness to this young man that made it hard to dislike him.

Sensing my uncertainty, he added: “I have been in rooms with women who never knew that I was not one of them.”

He would just be a translator, after all.

“Can you adopt a feminine voice?” I hardly believed that the question came out of my mouth, and that I was seriously considering this crazy idea.

“I think that you have no other choice,” he said. But the voice was not a man’s voice at all. It was a perfect woman’s voice. Not shrill or imitated, but gentle and feminine – soothing and reassuring. And persuasive.

“Do you have anything to wear?” I asked him. He was about the same size as me. I had pants and tops that were what I favoured – clearly female clothing without being overly girly.

“I can remove my beard and I know about makeup,” he said. It was clear that he was serious, and so was I. No matter how outrageous the idea might be, it was going to happen, if it was the only way for our meetings with these women were going to take place.

I did check for alternative translators, but he was right. We arranged the meeting later that very afternoon, and for him to turn up and serve as translator. A female one.

I had my doubts, but my options were limited and I had a series of meetings with the Afghan community scheduled, starting with that meeting with key women leaders.

I confess that I was shocked when he entered the room. As a rule, Muslim women do not wear much in the way of makeup, and keep their heads covered. They can wear robes but usually underneath they wear pants of some kind to completely cover their legs. He was wearing the dark pants that he had borrowed from me, and the patterned top, but over that he wore bright shawl which was drawn lightly over his hair. His eyebrows may have been plucked slightly – they were certainly brushed into a feminine shape. It was in contrast to my own eyebrows which I had let go “natural” over recent years. She wore eyeliner, which was not uncommon in Islamic countries where kohl has been used for centuries. It made those big brown eyes look all the more inviting.

“My name is Aisha,” he said, as if we had never met. It seemed appropriate. Not the name, but the introduction. I had never met her.

I consider myself a professional. I do not get involved with clients or colleagues as a strict rule. But nor am I without sexual drive. I found that despite my rules and everything I knew about this person, that was attracted to her, for that is what she seemed to be. It threw me, I have to say it. But such feelings are as strong in a lesbian and in anybody else.

I introduced myself and, using my notes, the other three Afghan women in the room with me.

There was an exchange in their language. It was clear that this person was immediately accepted as female.

“They started speaking to me in Pashto, but it seems that Dari is a better language for all of us,” the translator explained. The knowledge of both languages did not surprise me. The easy ability to communicate did, a little. I have used many interpreters over my years in the job, and few had the ability to involve me in the conversation such as happened then.

When they were finally ushered from the room, I commended him. But when the scarf was pulled from the head, I found myself confused again. The hair that had been tucked in the shawl was revealed and included a mass of soft curls on the sides and the back. This was her, not him.

“You have had your hair done,” I said with a smile. I had been a while since I had mine styled.

“I did it myself,” she said. “It might sound silly, but doing my hair helps me to become more womanly. I learned how to do it years ago when my hair was longer. Somehow, even under the scarf it seems I am no longer male when I look like this.”

And he went over to the mirror and primped the curls a little to restore their shape.

“You’re going to go home like that?” I asked her.

“I came like this,” she said. “I draw less attention like this than pretending to be a man. I will get back on the bus and go home as a woman. You have another meeting for me in the morning. I have no reason to change back even when I get there.”

“Let me drive you home,” I offered.

“It is a long way, and it is late,” she said. She was still speaking in a very feminine voice. It was as if what she said was true – the clothes and the hairstyle had made the man in him disappear. I found the lustful thoughts returning.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Perhaps we can stop for a meal on the way. My treat.”

I still wonder how it was that I felt the way I did. I had always thought that as a lesbian my attraction to other women was almost at a molecular level. If you had asked me whether a woman attracted to other women could be drawn to a man dressed as a woman, I would have called the idea absurd. Therefore, it seemed as if there had been a change in this person so fundamental that this was a woman. It was not me, it was her.

We talked about it over dinner. I explained that I was a lesbian and Aisha said to me that sexual relationships between women could not exist in Islam, but they did.

“But you could not be attracted to me?” she asked.

“Yesterday you told me that you could be a woman, not just to pretend to be one. I did not believe you. I was wrong.” I was telling her that she was a woman as far as I was concerned. What I was really saying was that I wanted to go to bed with her. When that finally dawned on her she became worried.

“I would never dishonor you,” she said.

“When it comes to lesbian sex, you are clearly inexperienced,” I explained. “Two women enter into an erotic encounter as equals. If you are a woman, you cannot dishonor me as you say. That is a notion for men. I am not interested in men.”

“I would be a woman for you, if that is what you want.”

Would a true Muslim woman have agreed to what I was proposing? Prabably not. I have a strong libido. As strong as a man’s maybe. And the truth is that I had been without a partner for some time. As a rule we lesbians prefer relationships unlike gay men. But this was an opportunity, and I was keen.

She came to my apartment. She made a point of concealing the part of her body that I might find offensive. The rest of her was smooth and surprisingly soft. Even the absence of full breasts did not concern me. Plenty of my girlfriends had been flat chested.

She seemed to treat my body in the same way. It was as if she had taken my comment about equality to heart, or maybe she just instinctively made love as a woman would. She was a woman, so it seemed, in every way but one.

And in that regard, I found it easier to receive than I would have thought. She had no vagina for me to nuzzle and I could not bring myself to lick her clitoris, but I was more than happy to have her use it as a fleshy dildo – a change from plastic. She used a condom so that we would both be spared emissions.

She stayed with me and we woke together.

“I could be more of a woman if you like,” she said. “I know the treatments that are available.”

It was a commitment that touched me to my core. It was clear that she wanted to be with me, and I was in need of somebody to call mine. I am not saying that it was love then – I was still filled with uncertainty because of that obvious anomaly. As I said, I was a lesbian. I had never had a man. I could never love a man.

But I fell in love with Aisha.

None of my friends knew of my betrayal of my sexuality. The only comment that might have been made was about her overly feminine behavior at times. But women, and lesbians, come in all types. For myself, I am still aware of my appearance. Anybody, no matter what their sexual preference, wants to present well. My statement was that Aisha came from a culture where beauty products were effectively banned, so in America her hair and makeup were an expression of liberation.

And I liked the way she looked. She seemed to get more beautiful to me every day. I put it down to the hormones making her more womanly as they flooded her body.

The downside for her was in sex, but she found a way – we found a way. She could receive as well, but as she pointed out, that reminded her too much of her life in *bache bazi*. I would not push for that.

“If I had a vagina I would love for you to fuck me,” she said. I never liked the word. It was too male. But I never doubted that wanted to give herself to me.

We lived together, we worked together, we had sex as often as we like, and we spent as much time as possible in one another’s arms. It was the perfect life, while it lasted.

Then we got a new president and she was to be deported. You can imagine her horror. Not only would she be losing me, but arriving in Afghanistan with a body like hers, what chance did she have.

It seemed like the only answer was marriage. If I could marry her then she could get residence.

“We could marry as a man and a woman,” she said.

It was true, but I could not face that. It seemed to me to be wrong on so many levels.

“I could only marry you as a woman,” I said. It could be done. In our state same sex marriage was legal, and post-operative transwomen could be registered as women. But it meant that surgery would be required.

I confess that there was a part of me that would miss the special dildo that my fiancée carried with her, despite the fact that its existence was always a problem for me. But my concerns must have paled against hers.

“You know that I would do anything for you,” she said. “Anything for our relationship, for our happiness together.” When she put it like that it seemed as if it was no dilemma at all.

The dates were set. The operation, the registration, and the wedding. Surgery was kept secret, but the rumor among my friends was that Aisha had suffered “female circumcision” (which is really clitoridectomy) as a child, and the surgery was to correct that. It seemed a nice story not to be contradicted.

But any surgery involves risk and pain, and my precious Aisha was fearful. I was there with her. She forced a smile as she went in, but really it was a matter of life and death for her. And for me, I would at last put to bed the guilt that I felt for enjoying sex that was not true lesbianism.

But somehow the operation changed everything.

We were married. We both wore white, but Aisha wore the dress and I wore the suit. There were no men invited to the celebrations. My father declined to attend. There was no traditional wedding night sex. It would take months of dilation and post-operative care before I could enjoy her virgin vagina, but when I did, it did not seem real somehow. I mean, it was perfectly formed, and quite beautiful, but it did not smell or taste like a vagina.

I am not sure whether Aisha realized my feelings, although given how close we were, she must have.

I would like to say that this story has a happy ending for me, but it does not have. We lived together as wife and wife until a few months ago. Then she left, by our mutual agreement. I have been alone ever since.

I have found a new translator. An older woman. A real woman, but extremely ugly and rather unpleasant.

I think of Aisha often, but I cannot forgive her for taking up with a man. It seems that she was a woman all along, but not a lesbian.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2020