Neuter

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Part 1

They were well in the air before he noticed the person sitting next to him. The stewardess was responding to a call and the person turned, and he recognized the face immediately. Still he waited for a moment before speaking.

“Excuse me,” you may think that this is rude and way to forward of me, but I think that recognize you. You are Jay Thornley, the neutered guy, sorry, person, aren’t.

“I am them,” they said, without looking up.

“Them?”

“It’s a general neutral term, just like I and you,” they said. “Other people refer to me as they or them.”

“But I can refer to you as you?”

“If you were talking to me you could,” they said. “But I dare say that I disgust you, you being a man.”

“Not at all,” he said. “In fact I agree with a lot of the things that you have recorded as saying, and I think that you have made a very brave protest.”

“Really,” they said. “Well, you should understand that it was no real sacrifice. I dislike men and all they stand for. Therefore, I could not accept being one. I happily surrendered my testicles not just as a protest, but to leave the ranks of your kind of people.”

“Well I admire all people of principle, even if I might not agree with those principles,” he said.

“Oh really. So, you believe in manhood?”

“I believe in mankind, or as I prefer to call it, humankind. It’s a general neutral term, just like I and you.”

“Half of humankind is bent on violence and repression. Your half,” they said.

“Slightly less than half of the world is male, if that is what you are referring to. That is if you take account the people in the middle like you. But you are being unfair. There are men who believe in most of the same things that you do. I might be one of them.”

“Do you believe that all men are rapists?” they said. “Men have rape in the hearts even if they deny it. They rape women mentally by leering at them. I am sure you do, every day.”

“You don’t know me,” he said. “But to be honest, I don’t know you either. Apart from hating men, what else do you believe in? Or is hating men enough?”

“I consider myself to be a person of principle,” they said. “I believe in social justice and world free of violence and hunger. I believe that this is possible, of patriarchy ceases. What is required to make anything happen is to make people aware of what is wrong. That means more than protest, it means acts of personal courage to show a commitment to principles.”

“That sounds like a well-rehearsed line,” he said. “But I have no issue with any of it, including having men stand aside from leadership to give others a go. Women, I mean. And others. Like you perhaps?”

“Now you are being patronizing,” they said. “That’s a male thing.”

“Not only men patronize. But I can assure you that was not my intention.”

“The nature of men is that they seek to impose their will on others,” they said, at last turning to him to seriously converse. “Violence towards women and children is just part of it. Male domination, rape, is not just a crime of physical violence, but it is also the most damaging form of psychological violence. Men can do this against whole populations, making them cower and obey. Rape is one against expression of racism and imperialism. Races, people, groups and nations can be control by belittling them as weaker or inferior. Rape can only be committed by men. As I said, all men are rapists, in that any of them, including you, have the potential to rape.”

“It’s an interesting perspective,” he said. “But I cannot think that seeing a beautiful woman puts me in the same boat as Hitler or Saddam Hussein.” He held up the magazine he was reading. It was a sports magazine but had an advertisement on the back featuring a scantily dressed woman.

“That is pornography,” they said. “Pornography is the symptom of the disease. Men who fantasize about the scenes they view, in particular violent sex or the humiliation of women, are the worst kind of rapists. Even if they never take the next step and act upon their perversion, they are committing rape in their minds.”

“I suppose that your procedure has put an end to that,” he observed.

“It is typical of a man to be facetious,” they said. “Yes. I became increasingly uncomfortable with thinking like a man. That and, as I have already told you, the fact that I was a man at all. It seemed to me then, and now, that all of the violence in the world is caused by men. Women are the givers of life through childbirth, the sustainers of life by lactation, and they are by their nature, home builders and healers. Men are the complete opposite. They exist to dominate and destroy, even if their violence is short of physical, sometimes.”

“But you do not want to be a woman?” he asked.

“I would have been happy to have been born a woman, but I wasn’t. All I could do was to eliminate the source of the negativity. That negativity and any violent thoughts that I may have had, were rooted in my male chemistry, coming from testicles. So, I had them removed.”

“So now you are neither one nor the other?”

“I became a person. I am a person. Call me sexless if you like. I am not unhappy to be described that way.”

“It must have been difficult for you?” he said.

They felt that there was genuine concern in the voice of this stranger – this male stranger.

“I was ready for the publicity, while it lasted,” they said. “I suppose that I was disappointed that my protest was so quickly forgotten. Perhaps that is why I am talking to you. To know that there are still people who know why name and what I stood for, and still stand for. There were physical changes, but nothing I was unhappy about. I welcomed the loss of beard growth and muscle mass. But yes, there were difficulties. I think you might call them the change in my social position. I mean, I had nailed my colors to the mast as it were, so I lost my association with the men I knew, even those who shared my beliefs. I seemed to be placed with the women. I am not unhappy about that. What upsets me is that the sexes should be divided this way. We are all humanity.”

“It is a binary world,” he said. “Despite pioneers such as yourself, it still remains largely binary.”

“You’re right,” they said. There was a moment of contemplation before they asked: “So what about you, male person to my left? What is your story.”

“Well, I am trying to solve the world’s problems too, in my own humble way,” he said. “I used to work for UNICEF in helping with child health and hunger, but I now work for the UNDP promoting ethical resource management in the developing world. We are trying to make a difference, and I think that we are achieving a huge amount. I am on my way to Africa now for 6 to 8 months on solid projects.”

Jaye felt suddenly very small. They had been lambasting this person from the moment he had opened his mouth. Yet he seemed to have the dream job – helping the underprivileged and downtrodden in a practical way. They felt ashamed, and that they should somehow repair any poor feelings.

“Our flight is almost over, but I would like to hear more about what you are up to. I will give you my contacts and perhaps you could call me when you get back. We might catch up?”

“I would like that,” he said. “I have honestly enjoyed our chat, but can I just be rude for a second time and make a couple of observations?”

“Go ahead,” they said.

“I think you might come over as being a little too aggressive. It’s almost macho.”

“Macho is not what I am going for,” they said. “The very opposite in fact. What’s the second thing?”

“That short hair is also way too masculine. You should wear it longer.”

“Believe it or not this was a buzz cut three weeks ago. When you have no testicles your hair grows like a weed.”

Part 2

He recognized them immediately, despite the fact that they were wearing dark glasses and a floppy cap. They were waiting in the lobby, standing leaning against a decorative column in jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. When they saw him approach the smile was more welcoming than he had anticipated.

“Welcome home,” they said. “I have to say that this is a very smart hotel for an aid worker.”

“I am sorry to tell you that I am staying here on the UN because I am still on contract,” he said. “I have a couple of days to report to the Secretariat and then I head back to Africa.”

They looked crestfallen. They just said: “Oh. I was hoping that we might … talk. What with everything that has happened recently …”.

“You don’t have to explain,” he said. “Come up to my room for a bit. I can tell you about what I am up to. Then we can go from there.”

“That would be great,” they said.

In the elevator he realized how small they were. Well below average height for a man, with small hands and long fingers. They looked straight ahead, as people do.

When they both got to his room, they took off their dark glasses and then their cap. A mass of light brown hair tumbled out. They could see him looking at it with approval.

“I took your advice and I have not cut it since I last saw you,” they said. “You were right. The butch look made me look and feel aggressive. I think that I have mellowed since I started to look less male.”

“It looks good,” he said. “You look good. I mean, you look more comfortable.”

“I have to tell you that I think about that flight a lot,” they said. “Not so much what we talked about, but more about my attitude to men. It has tempered since we spoke. Not all men are as bad as I thought.”

“And women can be worse?”

“Well, you have obviously heard what I said,” they sighed. “I stand by my words, but I have made a lot of women in this city very angry at me. So, I have to wear the hat and the shades. I’m hiding, I guess. It makes it hard for us to go out anywhere.”

“Well, I have some vouchers from “the Dip”, so I was hoping to take you to dinner. That disguise will never work where I would be taking you.”

“Are you suggesting a date,” they asked with a smile. “A guy doesn’t take a eunuch on a date.”

“I could take a girl,” he said. He was staring at them. Then maybe looking them up and down.

“No. I’m not that.”

“Of course, you are not,” he said. It would just be a better disguise than what you are wearing. Just for tonight. And I have vouchers for that too. See. Clothing vouchers. I have enough clothes. We could walk one block and have you in a perfect disguise within an hour or two.”

“That’s so … binary.” It was a limp protest.

“It’s a disguise, Jay.” He looked at them as if to scold, but somehow pleading that they should agree.

“Ok,” they said. “But I warn you, I am not going to do the girly walk or anything like that. That would be a caricature of feminine behavior and I am not into stereotypes.”

“Be a tomboy then,” he said. “But let me dress you since I am paying. Plus, I am the best to judge what will best hide the infamous Jay Thornley – manhater now womanhater as well.”

He was still smiling as they left the hotel and made their way down the street. Jay put the hood up on the sweatshirt until they were inside the store.

“This is ridiculous,” they said, from behind the fitting room curtain. “This is everything that I do not believe in.”

“You need shape,” he said. “Without shape you are sexless, and that is the very person we are disguising. So, the underwear is essential.”

“But does it have to be a dress?” they asked plaintively. “It could be pants.”

“Come out,” he commanded.

They stepped out of the fitting room. The dress was green and hugged he figure that had been sculptured by what they wore underneath. The legs were bare but shaped deliciously. As his eyes lifted, he witnessed the bust as Jay pulled back their shoulders for a better look in the mirror. The brown hair tumbled around the face untidily. The face was now smiling. Shining in a way that made his heart leap a little.

“It actually does look pretty good, doesn’t it?” Jay said.

“Well, you’ll need pantyhose and some shoes – sensible but elegant,” he said. “And a bag, with something in it. But we need to do something with your hair. There is a salon in this department store, and still some credit available on the vouchers, so … let’s get you those other items and then get you upstairs. When I know how long this is going to take, I can make a booking for dinner.”

“You’re not telling me what to do, are you?” they said, disapprovingly.

“Just a suggestion,” he said. “What do you want to do?”

“What the hell,” they said. “I am going upstairs to have my hair done! Just for the sake of the disguise. It’s really for you. So that you will not be seen at dinner with somebody like me”

“We can just relax and talk to one another if you think nobody will be staring at you,” he said. “And if they are it will be for a completely different reason.”

The restaurant said that he would have to be there by 7:00 to secure the table, so after waiting for almost 2 hours, he had to text Jay with details and the message: “when you are done, meet me there”.

He was in for his second revelation of the evening, when that green dress reappeared. But now the person wearing it walked with the assurance of a sophisticated young woman. Could this really be Jay Thornley?

Her hair was drawn up with curls on the top, so that a slim neck was in view. She wore silver drop earrings which sparkled. Her face had been made up expertly. There were shaped eyebrows and thick eyelashes, eye shadow and bright red lipstick. The look was simply stunning. He rose from his seat, less from politeness than from sheer awe.

She drew closer. She was smiling.

“You look fantastic,” he said.

“I know,” they said. “Don’t I just. I could not believe it. I don’t look anything like me. I have walked here from the department store and the only looks I have had, have been with smiles instead of smirks or scowls. Actually it makes me feel … quite happy really.”

“That’s good,” he said, standing to pull out her chair.

“Chauvinist behavior,” they scolded, but with a smile.

“Guilty,” he said. “My true nature has been revealed.

They looked at their reflection in the mirror across the dining room, saying: “I think that they went way too far. With the ear piercing and eyebrow plucking. God knows what I am going to do about that tomorrow.”

“You might have to stay in disguise for a few days,” he suggested.

“Do you think that I could?” they asked. “I could remain incognito and do a few things that I haven’t been able to do as me.”

“See how you feel tomorrow,” he said. “But for now, there is the menu, and you can choose the wine if you like.”

“You choose,” they said. “You are paying remember. Now tell me all about Africa.”

So, he did. They talked. They ate. They drank. They laughed. And for everybody around them they were just a man and a woman, in a restaurant, out on a date.

And that was exactly how it felt to them.

As they left the restaurant, Jay became suddenly aware that they had perhaps drank a little too much. That, and perhaps even with the fairly low heels on those shoes, they found themselves a little unsteady on their feet. They stumbled just slightly, on the uneven paving. His arms were around them. Suddenly they felt limp in those arms. He kissed them on the lips.

Their body stiffened in his arms. They said: “I didn’t consent to that. Advances like that, without consent, are rape. You know that.”

“You had better consent then,” he said. “Because I intend to do it again.”

As his lips returned, they told themselves that they should object. This was a man taking advantage. There was no consent. But that was not true. This time they kissed him back.

As their lips parted for the second time, they looked at one another, in the dim light of the street light, which showed only as a sparkle in their eyes, each of them. It seemed that they were looking at one another in exactly the same way.

“But I’m not a woman,” Jay said, with a tear forming in just one eye.

“Well, you’re definitely not a man,” he said

“No,” they said. “I am not that.”

“I am going to take you back to my hotel, back to my room for the night,” he said. He said it in a way that offered them no choice in the matter. It was dominating and domineering. It was masculine and overbearing.

“Ok,” they said.

Part 3

She was wearing the dress. The green dress. The dress that he had bought for her months before. But now it seemed to look even more beautiful, or she did.

She was looking up at the arrival information board and did not notice him immediately. He had time to admire her from afar. Her hair was so much longer now. It hung loose around her shoulders, now with some blond highlights that made it shine like spun gold.

If she wore makeup then it was subtle, with only the long eyelashes darkened and the lips enhanced with a shade of pink. The shoes were new. High heels, which made her legs shapely. He could see her right toe tapping nervously, as if saying: “Where is he?”

He was there. She saw him. She came towards him, her heels clipping with remarkable speed across the hard concourse floor. The smile on her face was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

She threw her arms around him. He held her tight. He could feel her tears of joy on his neck. She was just saying his name again and again.

They broke the embrace so that they could kiss. A perfect kiss. Two pairs of soft lips, heated with passion, quivering with anticipation, locked for just more than a moment, telling a thousand love sonnets without a word.

“I hate these trips of yours,” she said. “I know you are doing good work, but to hell with the world, I want you here.”

“As direct as always, my darling,” he observed. “So, you’ll be pleased to hear that I will be based in New York for the next year at least.”

“We can do everything we have been talking about in our emails,” she said, with visible excitement that he found enchanting.

“We can do everything you want,” he said. “The surgery. The wedding. The house. The adoptions. Everything that you told me once that you would never be able to have.”

“I was neuter then,” she said. “I’m not that now.”

“No,” he said, stroking her beautiful hair and gazing into her joyful eyes. “You certainly are not.”

“Oh darling, I am so happy.” It was obvious to everybody who cared to look at that handsome couple standing in the middle of a crowded arrivals hall. “You have made me the happiest woman in the world.”

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| And she was – or soon would be.  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019 | Related image |