A Second Life

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I thought we were happy. I am not sure that any marriage was perfect, but I thought we were happy. I just could not understand why he would disappear and leave me and the boys behind.

It was the day after we returned from holidays together. For some reason he had not had a haircut for months and had grown what for him was a fairly substantial beard. He had said that he was going in to town to have a haircut and a proper shave before starting back at work the day after. He just never came back.

I was confused and called his father and several of his friends to ask after him, but I did not call the police until the following day. I had hoped that I would wake up in the morning with him beside me. I would scream at him for not telling me where he had been, but I would forgive him. But when he was not there I assumed the worst. He must have been involved in a car accident.

The police were understanding but largely dismissive. They asked about whether there were marital problems. They explained that it was not uncommon for husbands (and wives) to simply take off if there were stresses or pressures. In most cases they would come back, or at least reappear to terminate the relationship. But Jonathan and I had never had any real strain in our relationship. That explanation made no sense.

However the detective assigned did check the hospitals and were able to rule out an accident. At least not an accident anywhere near our hometown. The car was missing too, but it was the old Ford that he had bought for our oldest son. Non-descript and of no real value. He had left his prized BMW in the garage. If he was leaving us surely he would have taken his car.

It just added to the mystery.

The detective suggested that I check the house to see if anything else was missing. He had taken no clothes, toiletries or luggage. He only had his wallet. That was not the sign of a man leaving his family permanently.

Money problems was another possibility raised by the police. Was he in financial difficulty? The total opposite. He had recently paid off the mortgage. We owned the smaller property next door with a small mortgage, but that was rented out and servicing the debt. I had a freehold home and an income from next door. Plus Jonathan earned a good salary and was secure in that job, with a small percentage of the company he worked for. No real money problems.

Plus I worked part time as a teacher. Over this difficult time I was given leave but I had a job if I needed it, and fulltime work was a prospect. Our family could cope with financial difficulties if they were to arise. No explanation there.

I called his work and went around to visit the office. They explained that he had tidied up all his files before he had gone on holiday, and while they awaited his return, everything was operating smoothly in his absence. Did this mean he had planned to leave permanently? Again his staff agreed that he had taken no personal items from the office, including things he attached value to. Everything was still there.

I went to visit his father John. I had always thought of them as being close. We talked for hours trying to understand what could have been behind him walking away. The more we talked the more it seemed to us that he must have been abducted and perhaps murdered. It was not a happy thought, but why else would we have heard nothing. There seemed to be no explanation.

John offered to help with the boys where he could, but they were now 17 and 15 so fairly independent. Still, he was a help. I never really had too much time for him, but with Jonathan missing it was good to have somebody to talk to about parenting.

I became very angry. If Jonathan was alive then he was a prick for leaving us. If he was dead, then was still a prick for leaving us. I found myself swinging between anger and sadness. I threw something across the living room a couple of times, and had to clean it up. I cried myself to sleep more than a few times.

Somehow I knew that he was not dead. It was my mission to find out what had happened to him.

After a couple of weeks I decided that I would go through his bank statements and records. I was looking for something out of the ordinary but I could not find anything. What did strike me was that during our marriage Jonathan had made a lot more money than I had thought he had. His business was in property development, and in addition to his salary Jonathan had collected profit shares on some deals. But he seemed to have regularly borrowed money from a company Transamazon Mortgage and Loan. I recognized that this was the company that we still had a small debt to on our investment property.

I emailed Transamazon to obtain a statement. I received a reply to indicate that the debt was being directly paid out of rentals and would be paid off within about three years. Which is exactly what happened.

I will not say that those three years were easy, but once I had accepted the fact that Jonathan was gone, I was able to move on. I still had sort of “phantom sightings” where I thought I saw him in a passing car, or in the crowd at a game on TV, or even at the end of the aisle in the supermarket. The hardest thing was when my youngest son left for college, leaving me alone. I had a good circle of friends, Jonathan’s father called by, and I had a few dates with men, but I was still an abandoned wife.

It was not until I received the notification of repayment by Transamazon that the questions came up again. When I compared my notes and earlier statements I noticed that debt was acknowledged as fully paid when it was not. There was still a half payment due. When I looked at the statements a little more closely I could see that they were not produced by a system but had been composed to look like they had. They were supposed to be alike but they were not. I started to wonder about this company.

I decided to check the details of this company. It turned out that it was very small with a single shareholder and officer, Delia Ann Stone, of Selbourne, Oregon. The company had been in existence for over 10 years, from the day before the first business with Jonathan. Whether there was a debt or not I could not tell, but Jonathan had being paying money to Transamazon since then, until his disappearance.

Was Delia Ann Stone the other woman? I had to find out.

I was able to check records for Selbourne but I could not find anything for Delia Ann Stone. But quite by chance when searching online I found a Delia Ann Fielding, apparently married to one James Fielding only a year before. James Fielding – are you my missing husband?

It had been such a long time that the police had basically forgotten about me. I discussed the possibility with my father in law John, and with a couple of friends. I had an idea that I could drive over the state line and seek out James Fielding, just to be sure.

I took Friday off and drove most of the day to get to Selborne. I had packed for overnight, but I decided to immediately drive to the home address I had obtained. There was a car in the drive. I was parked outside considering knocking on the door when a woman came out of the house and got into the car. She was about my age I suppose, quite tall, with longish blonde hair and nice legs beneath a fairly short skirt and expensive high heeled shoes. Was this the other woman? She was wearing fashionable sunglasses so I did not get a good look. I decided to follow her.

She pulled into a parked outside a hair salon, but only went in for a short period. She then drove around the corner to the supermarket and pushed a shopping trolley in.

I felt I needed to check that I had the right person, so I went into the hair salon. I said “Excuse me, but was that Delia Stone I just saw come in here?”

The woman at the counter chattily replied: “Yes. Delia Fielding now. She just made an appointment for tonight. The Charity Ball. She needs to be finished by 7:00. The Fieldings wouldn’t miss it. It’s a real occasion you know …”. It seemed the woman would chat on for hours, so I took my leave.

So I resolved that at 7:00 pm I would confront James Feilding. I had time to check in to a hotel and collect my thoughts. I was fully expecting to confront my husband that very evening.

As it happened she must have been out of the salon well before 7:00 as by the time I got on the doorstep the door was opening for the well-dressed couple to leave. The man was in a smart tuxedo with a bright blue bowtie. He was older and taller than my husband. He was not my husband.

“James Fielding?” I asked.

“Yes?” he said. He had a friendly face and bright blue eyes. It was as if I knew that I would like him. Or maybe it was just because it was not the man I was ready to scream at. I was momentarily confused and embarrassed.

Next to him stood his wife, not the hussy who had stolen my husband, just a very attractive woman with her copious hair now styled in an ornate updo. My eyes passed to her, perhaps with an apologetic look. But then I looked at her eyes – perfectly made up, big and green, and … moist with the beginning of a tear. And I realised.

“Jonathan?”

She turned to her husband, and said: “Darling, would you please wait in the car. I need to talk to this lady in private for a moment.”

Her voice was a perfect match for her appearance. Totally feminine. So why did she have my husband’s eyes?

“Please, James,” she said.

He went to the car.

“This cannot be true,” I said. “Please tell me this is not you.”

I looked at her from the ground up. She was wearing a long ball dress with a slit showing her perfect legs and 4” heels. The bodice was low cut showing a substantial bosom. Her skin was flawless and her complexion perfect. The face was recognizable but not male. She was beautiful. There was a jewelled pendant around her smooth neck and a jewelled pin in her sumptuous hairdo.

“I can explain, but not now,” she said. “Where are you staying? Can I come to you?”

“Not now? Not now?!” I was angry. “You owe me an explanation. I want it now.”

“Where are you staying? I will come to you tonight. I promise. You are entitled to an explanation, and you’ll get it. You have to let this sink in a little first. Please. I am not entitled to any favors, but I am pleading for one now.” The voice was high, feminine. It just added to the unreality of the moment. It did not sound like his voice, but it sounded like him.

I have no idea why I did not thrash it out on that doorstep, but I found myself saying “Quality Inn Room 206”. And then she was gone, holding her hem of the ground with one hand, clutching an evening bag in the other, mincing down to the car where her man awaited with the door open for her.

I think it was just the shock of it all. How do you deal with a situation like that? My husband Jonathan was a real man. Who was this person? The car pulled away and she did not even look at me.

I was fuming. If I had held a gun I would have emptied it into the car pulling away.

Part of me was furious that I had been abandoned, although I had always carried this thought. The only other explanation for the total disappearance of my husband was that he was dead and that his body had washed away somehow. But I never really believed that. As I said before, I felt that he was alive, somewhere. That he had left us – all of us. So the feeling of abandonment was nothing new. But it seemed worse now that he was found.

Then there was the house I was standing outside. Nice house. Better than mine, although I could hardly complain. But his life was better than mine. He had a partner who was sharing his life. I didn’t.

Finally, had he spent our whole married life lying to me? Was he transsexual? How could I not know? How could he deceive me into marrying him? How could he pretend to be the man I thought he was? His whole life with me was a lie, and a vicious one.

By the time I got back to my motel I had decided that I would call his father John. I told him: “I have found him. He is living here in Selborne. He is living as a woman.”

“That is crazy,” said John. “Somebody is playing a trick on you. A cruel trick. My son is not a fag. You know him. He is as much a man as I am. I would know. I cannot believe it. It must be a mistake.”

The more he talked the more I started to doubt things. I did seem unbelievable. So who was this woman? Would she come to see me? Just in case I decided to change into a dress and tidy myself up. I wanted to send a message that I was pretty and desirable, and that I could not simply be thrown onto the scrap heap.

She did come. It was just after 11:00 that evening, so I had been waiting a while. She called me down to the bar, probably because we were less likely to cause a scene in public. But we sat in an alcove area. She had not changed. She was still in the ball gown. Her legs were crossed and exposed by the slit in her dress. The sheer black hose showed them off. I thought my legs were good, but they were not a good as these. After some hours at a function the makeup and hair were still perfect. She was stunning.

The waiter came over as soon as I sat down, before I could even speak. She ordered Campari. I said: “I thought you drank beer and bourbon chasers?”

“That was before,” she said. I had never tried Campari but I ordered one too.

“So Jonathan…” I began, looking at her for acknowledgment. It was him all right. “I have only one question – why?”

“The answer is right in front of you,” she said. “This is me. I lived a lie for forty years. I came to a point where I needed to be the person I am.”

“But why couldn’t you tell us,” I pleaded, as if I actually meant it. I didn’t want to know now. How could I have coped if he had told me earlier?

“It is simple. I didn’t want you to know. I didn’t want my father to know. I didn’t want the boys to know, or my friends. I lived in a male world.”

I just listened. I wanted him to do the talking. It was his explanation.

He continued: “I am sorry. I just didn’t have the strength to go through all of that. I might have been brave as a man, but the real me is a bit of a coward. I just ran away. I suppose that I hoped that all of you would remember me as the man, the son, the father. Not some transgender freak.” And he added: :”Not that trans-people are freaks, but I am sure that my father and both the boys think they are. I know what their attitudes are. So do you, I think.”

“Don’t you realise how much you hurt us?” My tears were starting.

“I would have hurt you just as much as if I had killed myself. And that seemed to be my only option. You have no idea what I went through.” She was starting to cry too.

I hardened myself, and I spat out the words: “Maybe you should have killed yourself. Maybe you should have spared us this.” My hand swept over her disdainfully, but she still looked gorgeous.

“I should be dead to you,” she said, pulling herself together too. “Go home and tell them that I am dead. Have a funeral if you like. Jonathan deserves one. I think I was a good man when I was one. I had lots of friends and I did a lot of good things. I am proud of that. I am not proud that I ran away, but I still think it was the right thing.”

“What about the boys? What about your sons?”

“They don’t want a trans-father. They do not need me as I am. They need you. Their grandfather is a man for them to look up to. A real man.”

“They love you,” I whimpered.

“And I love them. I watch them, you know. I follow them on Facebook”, she said, wistfully. “I want them to do well. I will never stop loving them and caring what they do. I think that keeping my circumstances from them is a sign of my love for them. They do not need to carry the stigma of having a father living as a woman, and a wife to another man.”

Those words stabbed me. He was a wife. He had a husband.

He continued: “You might not understand this, but I love you to. I want you to be happy. As happy as I am now. To be happy you need to be with a man who is a man. That man is not me.”

“So you love me?” I sneered. “What about your husband, if that is what he is?”

“I am not a bigamist. In fact James’ wife is still alive. She is confined to a home as she has early onset Alzheimer’s. She has been, since before we met. We live together as husband and wife. I changed my name to his last month.”

“How convenient”, I sneered. “And you share a bed I assume. Have you still got a penis?”

“No.” That was it. We sat in silence for a moment looking at one another, before she added: “I have a fully functional vagina. James and I have a wonderful sex life. It is what I always wanted. I hope that I gave you pleasure while we were together, but all I have ever wanted was to be made love to by a man, as a woman.”

I was shocked. It was, as they say, too much information. I looked at her crossed shapely thighs and wondered about what exactly was between them. Clearly not the penis that had given me so many moments of joy, and fathered my children. I started to cry. She moved around the booth and put a hand on my shoulder and then pulled me towards her. She smelt of expensive perfume and hairspray.

The drinks arrived. She reached for her evening bag, but the waiter said: “No charge, the two gentleman at the bar wanted to pay for you lovely ladies.” He motioned to the bar where two good looking me lifted their glasses and smiled.

She made a point of ignoring them. It seemed as if she was used to getting the attention of men.

She was still close to me and she took my hand. It felt hers was soft and when I looked at it I saw that she had long perfectly manicured nails. My nails were tidy and painted, but more practical. Again she seemed more of a woman than I was.

“If us meeting means that you can now move on, then I am happy we did,” she said. “You need somebody in your life. I want that for you. Forget about me. I have burned my bridges. I did it for me, but the way I did it, I did that for you. It may be hard for you to accept but I am sure you will come to know that I am right.”

She lifted her glass delicately, and took a sip.

“I called your father and told him I had found you,” I said.

“What did he say?”

“He didn’t believe it was you.”

“I suggest you keep it like that. I spent my whole childhood trying to impress him. Trying to be him. A man’s man – that’s him. If he were to see me now he would be crushed. Is that what you want?”

“Is that why you married me? To impress your father?” I asked, bitterly.

“I fell in love with you. It is possible, you know. I don’t think love is about gender. Maybe I thought that you could fix my problem. For quite a while it seemed like you could. But I was wrong. It was my mistake and I am sorry for it. You cannot change your very core. It cannot be done. But I tried to be a good husband and father for as Iong as I could be. Was I?

I nodded as I wiped my eyes and nose with a hanky. It was true after all. He had been.

A man stood over us. The two men at the bar had come over. He said: “We were wondering if we could join you ladies.”

“We’re married,” she said. She held up her hand and pointed to a wedding ring. Not my husband’s wedding ring (he never wore one) it was hers. “She and I are married. To one another. Does that answer your question?”

I held up my hand too, so they could see my wedding ring. We were married, but not as they thought. They backed off sheepishly.

She smiled at me. I smiled back. The look on their faces was reason for some levity. But dispelling that, I asked seriously: “Do you want a divorce? If you do you can have it.”

“A dead person needs no divorce. But yes, if you want Jonathan to sign some papers I will sign them. Whatever I can do for you, I want to do”.

“So the mortgage. Transamazon is you?”

“Yes. I left you the interest in the property firm. Ben will hold it for you and deliver it in time. It is in the partnership arrangement so no death certificate is required after two years absence. I took some of the funds – less than 30% - into Transamazon. Transgender Amazon woman. That’s me. Basically I gave you everything. I have started from scratch. Fortunately I have some skills and, well, James has some money. I am rebuilding. Our new company is doing some modest development locally. We should make some profits. So, if you are not happy with what you have then you only need to tell me.”

“No. You left me with the things that matter. My home and my boys. The only thing you took from me was my husband. I don’t think I can forgive you for that.”

“I don’t expect forgiveness. Or I am not asking for it. But as for Jonathan, you never really had him,” she said. Draining the glass she had been sipping from. “He was a fabrication, a pretence. It could never last. I am sorry.” She paused. “I really must be going.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out her business card. There was a picture of her on it. It read “Delia Ann Fielding, Property Development Consultant”. There was a floral background and the card seemed slightly scented. Ridiculously feminine.

“I am not sure that we can be friends, but you should know that I care for you more than any other woman, and I am not expecting that to change. Send me the divorce papers, and maybe later on, if you feel like it, send me news about my father and the boys. I am sorry for what you have been through, but nothing that has happened today has convinced me that I did the wrong thing. If you think I’m right - keep my secret.”

She walked out of the bar. Her wonderfully proportioned rear end was beautifully displayed by the ball dress.

The two men appeared again. The same one spoke: “We’ve been talking about it, if you are willing we are still pretty keen on spending the rest of the evening with you and your … your wife.”

“I am sorry, but she has already left. And that was not my wife. That was my husband.”

The End

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Author’s Note:

When I first published this story on Fictionmania, I was expecting more criticism of Delia for running away. I was expecting some to suggest that she should have been more courageous and faced her family with her desire to transition. Instead, the first review was critical of the abandoned wife, the transitioner’s father in law, and even his/her two sons. And if those boys are bigoted is their father partly responsible? But are they bigoted? Here is a man (Jonathan) who loves his masculine father, and does not want to disappoint him; and he loves his masculine sons, and does not want to burden them with a father who is less than male. For such a person disappearance is a real option, as most of those who have commented in this story have understood. I think that the key was that he took the time and some considerable effort, to provide for those left behind.