The Return

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“That is confirmed, Captain,” said Officer Nandra. “We are approaching the elevator station in high orbit. It should come into view very soon. We are home!”

“Not quite,” said Captain Monigatti, now known to everybody as Gina. She was looking out of the star view wall, now with shields down. It offered a spectacular view of their home planet. “We have some explaining to do, and we barely have the answers ourselves, Pree.”

Pree Nandra stroked back her soft dark hair and checked that it sat well in the bun she had twisted it into, with only a memory of how her mother had done it and some months of practice to get it right. She knew what the captain was referring to. The change had affected all of them, and it was drastic.

“Given that we sent some indication of the problem they will be sending up a quarantine crew to meet us,” said Pree.

“They are already waiting at the station,” said Gina. “I have the shields down to look for it, and also to see what we have been missing in deep space. The earth looks so inviting, doesn’t it? The oceans look like one big swimming pool that I am dying to dive into”.

“You’ll need to buy a bikini for that,” said Control Officer Chang, now known as Rosy. She was checking her display to line up with the interception point, the very same dock they had left less than 3 years before on the journey to investigate the anomaly near to the edge of the solar system. From her seat she could see their home planet shining blue. “We’ll all need to buy one. Just imagine a swim after all this time in space.”

“I think that we have all come to terms with the way we are now,” said Pree. “It is deep in our makeup now – at chromosomal level. I can’t see it changing.” As Medical Officer she had been doing her best to understand what had happened them, and more recently the question of why.

“Has Matz readied our docking setup?” asked Gina. ”Because there it is, coming into view.”

“Matz will be ready, despite everything,” said Rosy. She was talking about Matz Kearns, the engineering officer who was probably the last to accept their fate, given that the alteration in her body has been the most pronounced. Matthew Kearns had been the biggest man on the ship. Matz was still the biggest, especially in the bust, but no longer a man. None of them were. Four women and eight men had left Earth. Now with one of the original women lost in tragic circumstances, they were now 11 – now all women.

“Explorer 17, please reduce your approach speed. We will be deploying a tractor beam.” The voice from the station came over the speaker. It was the voice of a man. It was the first time that such a voice had been heard in over a year.

“Oh my God, what a sexy voice,” said Rosy. “It is giving me butterflies.”

Pree would have said something, because it would seem unusual for their navigation specialist, and mathematician and rationalist, to be speaking that way. But, in fact she too was affected by the voice in an unexpected way. The feminine contents of her abdomen were relatively new, but it seemed to her that they were crying out to have a voice like that whisper some indecency in her delicate ear.

Gina stood solid, focusing on the view and the thought of that swim in the sea, but she had the strange feelings too, and it worried her. She had already decided that she needed to disclose more than their physical condition. Every day it was clear that much more had changed beyond their outward physical appearance.

“We are ready down here, Skip.” It was Matz, in position at the docking bay airlock.

“Standby to receive visitors,” said Gina. Her lapel microphone was open to the whole crew. “We had better assemble in the utility bay, everybody. We have something incredible to reveal and the only way it will be believed is to show it … to show ourselves.”

“I should stay here,” said Rosy. Gina nodded and she and Pree left the control station.

The utility bay was not always pressurized but was now. Empty of the probes that had been sent into the anomaly a year before, it was the largest open space on the ship and where the whole crew had met for collective discussions through the voyage back. Added to the Pree and Gina were the three remaining original women Stacey, Florence and Kim, all in life support and nutrition, plus Rodrigo now Ramona Aguliar from Engineering, Brooke Tran in charge of hull maintenance, Marta previously Marcus Rienhardt Astrophysics officer and Iris previously Ian Coburn, their physicotherapist and trainer.

It was clear that all of them had prepared for the occasion and why not, thought Gina. She herself had added some makeup, something they had all been experimenting with despite the very small supply. It had forced them to improvise using ingredients aboard – some compounds for machinery but most sourced the horticulture module. Gina had also arranged her hair, that had grown long and was her pride, by rolling it back and pinning with a clip of her own manufacture, to look pretty but practical. She liked to think of herself that way.

She could not help but notice that Matz, who stood ready to open the inner airlock, had her coveralls unzipped low so that the black bra that had been made by Ramona just for her, was visible barely cupping her huge breasts. Iris was wearing exercise clothing as she often did, showing how the once muscular male body had been eroded to a shapely female form without losing any athleticism.

Every face in the utility bay looked expectant – even hungry.

The door open and two men stepped out, wearing quarantine rather than pressure suits – light but impervious and topped with a clear bubble allowing everybody to see the obvious confusion affecting both men.

“What is going on here?” said the leader, who was later to identify himself as Captain Leon Rodgers of International Space Command. “We were told there were three women only, not … ten?! Where is Captain Monigatti?”

“I am Captain Monigatti.” Gina stepped forward. “But changed, as I will need to explain. In fact we are all present here to show you that change has affected all of our crew, or at least all the men … as you can see.”

“If this is a joke then you have gone to a lot of trouble,” said the visitor.

“I assure you that it is no joke,” said Gina. “Perhaps you should come to my cabin to discuss this. I just wanted you to see and understand what has happened first. I would invite you to take off you suits as I am informed that this is not a contagion, but I would understand if you want to keep suited up.”

The two men looked at one another before it seemed agreed that they would be cautious and maintain a barrier.

The two men were led to the Captain’s quarters which was really only big enough for the four of them - Leon Rodgers and his colleague Ben Jessup, Gina and Pree. The men introduced themselves and Gina introduced Pree.

“Officer Nandra is our physician and she also happens to be an expert in cellular biology, but first I think that we need to focus on what has happened to our crew. As you are aware I have been lodging reports on the mission but holding back some details. The reason should become clear but can I just say that we initially stayed silent because we did not believe what was happening ourselves. We even considered that it might be collective hysteria.”

“When did this happen?” said Leon. He was still staring in disbelief at the woman who called herself Captain Monigatti. She seemed female in every way, and attractive too.

“As you know from communications, after leaving earth we followed directions and headed straight for the observed disturbance on the outer reaches of our solar system, around 1.2 light years from earth. Accelerating off solar wind we were able to achieve as close as possible to light speed after about a year, and then we had to decelerate, so the journey took us almost 3 years, which was about what we expected. What we found was that there was nothing to see. In the last few months of our journey the seemed to have disappeared – or that’s what we thought. I suppose that is the problem of seeing something from earth that already occurred over a year we observed it, and then add the time for our modest technology to get somebody to it to investigate.”

“But we only saw it cease a few months ago,” said Leon. “When we got your message that you were coming back from the site, we assumed you had travelled much faster?”

“No, it is our return trip that has been faster ... much faster than we thought possible, given our crude drives and going into the solar wind. We can only assume that we had help. Our thinking is that we have pushed back home. The return journey has been about 15 months, which is so close to the speed of light that our radio messages have barely beat us home. That was one reason why we haven’t bothered with too much detail for quite a while. Most of this 15 months has been spent trying to understand what has happened to us and how we need to adapt. Perhaps you could comment. Pree?”

“When we reached the point where the disturbance should have been I think that we realized that we were in the presence of an alien force,” said Pree, with a look of serious intensity in her large dark brown eyes that both men stared at. “We came to a stop very suddenly and we stayed in a fixed position for some days. It is always hard to assess movement in space but we have measured this. Almost immediately I had members of the crew suggesting that they felt odd. That is not to say that they felt unwell, just different. I carried out tests, and it quickly became clear that there were small physical differences appearing. I felt that I should study these changes including running tests. That was when I discovered that somehow our DNA has been modified. None of us have any Y chromosome – the genetic mechanism for making somebody male.”

“Somehow you say? How do you know that it is not a contagion?” Ben spoke for the first time. He had not been introduced as such, but her guess was that she was talking to a fellow physician.

“There is no sign of any disease in any of our bodies, and even within cells that I have tested. An agency in the form of a virus or anything like that would have left a marker. It appears to have cellular modification by mechanical means by a single event, and ever since then, on this return journey, we have watched our bodies change daily.”

“The last vestiges of manhood disappeared months ago,” said Gina.

“You don’t appear too concerned, either of you,” said Leon.

“Well, that is another thing entirely, and Pree can talk about that too, but you’re right. We are strangely unconcerned about what has happened to us, and perhaps even more than accepting we are welcoming of it. Perhaps you have observed that, as much as we can given our mission uniforms, we have taken to presenting ourselves as feminine. Physical change is one thing. Pree has told us we are now all female – 100% so. But gender is something else, and that has changed too. The masculinity has disappeared too. We are now all feminine – 100%.”

“And I think that our sexual preferences may also have changed,” said Pree. “I think mine have.” She was looking at Ben, and he was looking backing, still in a state of disbelief in what he was hearing.

“I think that you are right, Pree,” said Gina. It was true. She was looking at Captain Leon Rodgers and imaging him standing naked in front of her, with a huge erection and a lascivious smile on his face. But she had to shake herself of that thought to add – “Which leads us all to the why.”

“The why?” Leon looked at Gina as if reading her mind. They were about the same age and he normally had a preference for women much too young for him, but now he was thinking about sex.

“Let’s imagine that an alien force did this to us,” said Gina. “The evidence appears to be that technology well beyond our abilities was involved even before you even consider biology. We were stopped dead in space and then kicked back to earth at speeds barely thought possible by modern physics. They did not introduce themselves. They did not destroy us. They simply changed our sexes and genders and sent us home at light speed. Why?

“Do you have an answer?” said Leon.

“No,” she said. “But are you going to take that suit off?”

Author’s Note: While casting around on Dreamstime for an image for the cover of my first collection of short science fiction, Erin came upon the image below and suggested “you need to write a story to go with this image”. I assumed the planet was Earth so “The Return” is that story. She was a he, but now looking down on Earth waiting for a the elevator link and thinking .... what?

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