The Poet

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

You may have heard of my Uncle Cyrus. He was a minor celebrity of sorts, a few years back. He wrote a small book about how men could charm women. It was a book based loosely on the assistance that he gave my cousin Chris in winning his lovely wife Roxy. It sold quite a few copies and Uncle Cyrus was interviewed on radio and local TV.

Our uncle is not so much older than my cousin and me, being the youngest of my father’s youngest sibling, so he was able to be right alongside Chris to help him charm Roxy. It was a guy helping a guy get the girl. It had to be that way. Things got a bit complicated back then, as for a while Roxy sort of developed a crush on Uncle Cyrus, but now she and Chris are very happy together and they are expecting their first child.

Uncle Cyrus worked (and still works) as a professor of English Literature specializing in poetry. He is a published poet as well, and sometimes I think that he talks in poetry as well. Beautiful words just seem to roll off his tongue quicker than spit.

At the heart of his poetry is always the relationship between men and women. You see, Uncle Cyrus has always said that he understands women, and the fundamental differences between male and female behavior. I guess that is why he considers himself qualified to give advice to men about women.

As a woman, that can sometimes piss me off.

Anyway, I had my own romantic issues, so I decided to ask my uncle to help me. This time I needed to ask him how to win over a man. To be precise, how to win over Tyler Gordon.

“My dear Emily, of course, I could do it,” said Uncle Cyrus. “And I would like to. It is just the kind of challenge I would like. I think that I know the male character just as well as the female one – I am male after all. But I cannot help you like I did Chris. What is required is coaching and prompting in real time. I would need to be right there as a girlfriend. And clearly, I cannot be that.”

“But you could,” I said to him. “You are always saying that you understand women, so it should be easy for you to become one, just long enough to help me.”

He just laughed. But then when he could see that I was serious, I could see him thinking. He was thinking: ‘Maybe I could’. That is my Uncle Cyrus. A bit full of himself, I guess.

Cynthia was his idea. He said it was some classical name. He likes classical things. I just called her Cindy.

Uncle Cyrus is not a big guy. In fact, he is quite small and slight. I suppose he styled himself as he thought a poet should look – a mop of long wavy dark hair, a goatee beard and a little thin moustache under his prominent nose.

“Without the beard, you could even be pretty,” I said – “If it weren’t for the nose.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I will do it, pretend to be your girlfriend, but the nose stays.”

He started to get quite interested in the project. He explained that while women fall for words, men are more receptive to how a woman acts. It was not his words that would help me to win over Tyler so much as his understanding of the male character. He could be alongside me as my cousin Cindy, setting up the plan to capture the heart of Tyler Gordon, responding to his cues and telling me what to do. What to say was less important. He gave me cues for when to smile, giggle and laugh. The 123 he called them.

But he needed to pass as my girl cousin. He was prepared to devote himself to that from the end of term, when his teaching commitments would cease for a period. That meant submitting to a makeover on the last day of term. He was prepared to go as far as not only allowing his eyebrows to be plucked, but also a full facial to remove his beard and any immediate regrowth. And he agreed to some fillers in his lips that would disappear over time. These procedures, and the body waxing, were drastic but short term. He would be back to normal later, and until then he was happy to make any excuse about his appearance that he needed to. Uncle Cyrus was supremely confident that he could deal with any questions raised. Confidence is his thing.

As for his hair, that was straightened and colored, and it was long enough to appear feminine. Once that was styled and some light makeup applied, Cindy was quite attractive, except maybe for that nose.

While Cindy had assumed that she would only talk in whispers to me, she now realized that she would need to function as female for the entire college break, and that meant making changes to her voice. For Uncle Cyrus, the voice was important – not as important as the words themselves, but a warm delivery adds to the content. Cindy spent more time on the voice than anything else. A keen observer of women, Cindy felt confident that she could move and act in a feminine way, once she had conquered the voice.

The first time we went out together, both in dresses, nobody would have guessed that Cindy was not 100% female. She wore a short dress as her legs were as good as mine, and padded underwear to show a nice shape, but she just looked normal. That suited me. She was just my cousin going out with me – not as pretty as I was with that nose of hers, but presentable and confident. And, as we all know, a plain friend can help to make you look even better.

She spoke in a soft tone. It was a deep voice for a woman I guess, but it somehow seemed just right. Somebody later described it as “warm caramel” as if voices have a flavour. But somehow, that does describe it.

We went to a bar and some guys came over to chat us up. It happens to me a lot, but I was not sure if Cindy would be ready for it. As it happened, she was a natural – totally at ease. It was amazing. I suppose that I started to realize then that there was something in Cindy’s personality that was attractive to men. It could not have been her face. Something else. I think that she realized it too.

She signalled that we should go to the ladies’ room together. It was as natural as anything. She even primped at the mirror while she talked.

“Emily, we could win these guys easily,” she said. “But this is not about picking up men. Your mission is love, and we need to focus on that. Let’s get as many free drinks out of these guys as we can, and then move on to the real prize. But I have to tell you: I’m enjoying this.”

We ended up with so many drinks that we were both a bit drunk when Cindy pulled down the door on those guys. But she did it with style.

“You two are true gentlemen, and so rugged and handsome too,” she said. “I am sure that you would not wish to take advantage of a couple of silly drunken innocents like us. I want to take a photo of both of you and get your telephone numbers. We’ll call to make a date next weekend.”

They just looked at one another. I could see they both wanted to push on, but to make a point, Cindy knocked a glass over in front of a waiter with an exaggerated: “Whoopsie daisy!” Suddenly we looked like a liability. With obvious disappointment they recited their numbers, but I guessed they knew they would never hear from us again.

Cindy was right. Our next date would be a double date with Tyler Gordon and his friend Hans. Actually more like his boss. An older guy around the same age as Uncle Cyrus.

She told me what to do. We sat in a coffee bar while she dictated the messages I was to send through.

“I know that this is a down time for him,” she explained. “He has time to dally with somebody over a text exchange. My suggestions need to sound like you. I tend towards longer messages.”

The basic idea was to ask him a favor: “I have a cousin in town, looking for a night out. Do you know anyone? Could you come out with a friend? I will owe you if you help me out.”

To be honest, I never would have done it if Cindy had not pushed me, and if I had started, I would surely have been flummoxed by his first reply. But we got a quickfire text session going, and before long (just as Cindy predicted) we had a date for that very evening.

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| Cindy suggested how we should dress. I should display my assets, and wear something bright, but avoid any try-hard overly suggestive look. She would wear something dark but show off her legs (which were gorgeous) with understated makeup except for bright red lipstick. We went to the salon to have our hair done, but not to appear as if it had been. I wore my hair up in a look that could have accidentally wonderful. Cindy’s hair was straight and glossy, turned under with a few soft curls. She looked quite beautiful, with an air of something deep and mysterious. I am sure that is exactly what she was looking for.  We arrived at the restaurant precisely 12 minutes late. Cindy suggested that 15 minutes would annoy them. Both men rose to meet us. Tyler looked great. Hans I did not know. He was tall and fair haired. He was good looking, but he had a rather large nose. | Image result for beauty with a big nose |

“So, pleased to meet you.” Cindy greeted both men. Then she looked at Hans with her finger on the tip of her nose and she said: “I think we’re a match. Was it deliberate?”

“I had no idea,” spluttered Tyler. “I mean we have never met, Cindy. Emily did not tell me …”.

“Oh, I’m just teasing Tyler,” said Cindy. “I tend to be that way. I hope you gentlemen will not find me too offensive.”

“I enjoy intelligent conversation,” said Hans.

I said: “I enjoy a drink before dinner.” It was the sort of thing I would have expected Cindy to say, but I said it. I suddenly felt quite confident. And when I looked at Cindy and heard her speak so womanly, I felt equally confident that we would get through the night without her secret coming out.

Hans asked her about herself and Cindy spun a great story. That is her skill. Now she was just a student of literature rather than a professor. She was returning to study after some years in advertising, but she had become disenchanted by the lies and deceit of that industry.

Both men seemed enthralled. I confess that when I looked at Tyler look at her, I wondered if it might be possible that this could be Roxy all over again, but as a man. Still, it ended up alright for Chris, so I needed to let things run.

We ordered drinks and then our meal, and we learned a little more about Hans.

He was Danish, although he spoke English without an accent. He worked as some senior consultant with the firm Tyler worked for, and Tyler has been designated to look after him while he was in town.

Hans talked about Danish literature – I never even knew there was such a thing. Who are Ingemann and Gruntvig? Apparently, Cindy had heard of them. The only name I recognized was Hans Christian Andersen: “The Little Mermaid, right?”

“And many serious works as well,” said Hans. “Much to be admired.”

“He was a man who refused to have sex,” Cindy announced. “Do you admire that in a man, Hans?”

“Maybe he never found the right woman?” Hans smiled at Cindy slyly.

“Or the right man? Or the right, whatever?” Cindy just stared at him. It was weird. Cindy was weird. Uncle Cyrus could be weird.

“Do you think sex is essential for a human of either, or any, sex?” Hans asked.

“We are animals,” said Cindy. “We are driven to procreate. That is the very definition of life. Men have a role to play. Andersen wasn’t playing.”

“What are those roles, then?”

“Women are fundamentally nesters,” said Cindy. “Nesters and nurturers. Men are hunters. They roam while women nest. Hunting is about survival, but men are also driven by the need to procreate. It is simple biology. The very nature of evolution. Men want their genes to be passed on. They hunt for a woman who will enable them to do that.”

“I don’t,” said Hans. “I have a brother who is happily passing on our family DNA. I don’t care about a woman’s ability to bear my children. I get paid to use my brain. I’m not a hunter.”

“I’ll remember that,” said Cindy. “But biology drives the desire of both sexes. Men are attracted to healthy women. Color in the lips is a good sign of health. That is why lipstick was invented. They look for childbearing hips to carry their child, and full breasts to suckle that child, to see that child survive to pass on the genes. Woman are looking for a man who can help them to build a nest.”

“So, what does a nest builder look like?” asked Tyler. “What traits must he display?”

“That’s easy,” Cindy leaned back. “Money”. She smiled.

Both men laughed. I was just confused. What exactly was Cindy trying to do?

But Cindy continued: “A woman wants to see that a man has the material resources to build the nest, and hopefully that he will settle into the nest with her. That’s not essential if the nest is good enough but having a man to hang around and be a husband and father is desirable.”

“I think that it would be essential,” said Tyler. He was looking at me. My heart leapt.

“Do you really?” I said. After I did, I hoped that it did not sound too coy. He replied with another smile.

“I want to buy you dinner tonight,” Hans said to Cindy. “Will you accept that as one twig in your nest?”

“I thought you said you weren’t a hunter,” Cindy said.

“I think you deserve a nest.”

“If you’re not a hunter, maybe I’m not a nester?” said Cindy.

“Simple biology?” Hans and Cindy were smiling at one another. Tyler and I looked at one another. It struck me that he was looking to take me away from this intellectual nonsense. If he was then I was giving him my best ‘please do’ look.

But it was not necessary. Hans was ready to leave.

“Unfortunately, I have to leave,” he said. “I have an early start, but I do want our conversation to continue. I will but dinner for everybody, but in exchange I insist on you giving me your phone number, Cynthia.”

“You give me your and we’ll call it a deal.”

“Will you promise to call me?”

“Nester’s honor,” Cindy said, with her hand on her left breast.

The following morning I didn’t feel so good. It wasn’t my tummy, or my head. I guess it was my heart. I didn’t feel that things had gone so well for me the night before. Where was the goodnight kiss from Tyler? Had he even noticed me.

I turned off my phone. It is the best thing to do if you just want to step out of your life for an hour or two. But when I switched it on I saw that I had a missed call from Tyler. My heart raced. I called him back.

“I had a really good time last night,” he said. “A lot of talking. But hey, … is you cousin seeing anyone at the moment?”

Talk about a collapse. Those words almost destroyed me. It was like Chris and Roxy all over again. Why not me? What was wrong with me. I had to say something. How about: “That was my uncle in drag, you idiot”. No.

“Oh, well she’s not going to be in town that much longer,” I said. Besides, she is smitten with your pal Hans. She talked about him all the way home.”

“Ok,” said Tyler, not even hiding his disappointment. “So I guess maybe another double date before she goes?”

“I don’t think they’ll want us around on that date,” I said.

“Right,” he said. “Yeah, … so … maybe you and I could go to a movie together?”

“Sure, I’m up for that.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Great.”

I had another less than an hour after I made arrangements to meet Tyler. It was Uncle Cyrus. I mean that it was not Cindy, it was Uncle Cyrus on the other end of the phone, saying: “I thought things went quite well last night”.

“You have to be kidding,” I said. “Tyler was asking me for your cell number.”

“Shit,” said Uncle Cyrus. “It’s like Chris and Roxy all over again.”

“Well I have told him that you are not interested in him because you are hot for Hans, so you had better be,” I told him.

“That’s a good call,” said Uncle Cyrus. “What did Tyler say?”

“Well, he asked me out. But I am not sure that he going to see me while Cindy is around.”

Then the voice on the phone changed: “Cynthia, the queen of the moon, shining brightly in the dark and endless sky.” It was Cindy.

She had Hans’ phone number, all she had to do was honor her nester’s promise to Hans and call him, maybe go on a couple of dates to show Tyler that she was not available. Then, when I was solid with Tyler, she could break it off and go back to being Uncle Cyrus. But that is not what happened.

I got solid with Tyler. That happened. For months while we were going out together I never saw Uncle Cyrus. I just got occasional emails from him commenting on photos of Tyler and me together, liking our happiness. I just assumed that Uncle Cyrus was back at the faculty. I was grateful, but to be honest I am still not sure what he had done. Tyler became fascinated with Cindy. How had that helped me? I had to pull him back from that, by myself.

I suppose it was like Chris and Roxy – it could have been a disaster but it turned out alright. Tyler and I got engaged. We threw a party. Tyler thought it was best to invite Hans. I had to invite Uncle Cyrus.

Uncle Cyrus didn’t turn up. Hans did. And on his arm was Cindy.

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| Image result for beauty with a big nose  Cindy | “Yes, isn’t life strange,” she said with a wave of her hand, now with long fingernails painted as red as her lips. “It turns out that I am a nester after all. I always thought I was a hunter, but I had to meet one to know one. Hans is definitely a hunter, and a good one. He allows me to live the life that I have always wanted. I teach now purely for pleasure. And I write now too. I never felt particularly creative as a man, but as a woman, well … I am everything I want to be.”  The End  © Maryanne Peters 2019 |

Author’s Note: It was French not Danish literature, that inspired this story. Uncle Cyrus is Cyrano de Bergerac.