Prison Therapy

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I never shared a cell with Saus Solnick. I like to think that if we ever had, if we had talked this through, none of this would have happened. If I knew who he was, I never would have followed him on this path.

I had seen him around the prison. He was a tough guy. Not big but a hard ass. He had a muscular body covered with tattoos, and he even had tattoos on his face. He had some association with gangs, but he was from out of state so not the gangs in our jail. But all the gangs seem to respect him so he no trouble with any of them.

I stayed away from the gangs, but I had earned some respect too. People knew who I was. I has three convictions for armed robbery, and it was widely known that I was responsible for many others. I had hurt people. One had even died, adding a homicide to my rap sheet. People left me alone.

I think that I had always been violent. It was just my nature. On my third day at elementary school I lugged some guy. I never stopped. I never took a backward step, I guess. I had trouble all through school. Luckily nobody was really badly hurt.

When I left high school, I found that there is always work for a brawler. I became a career criminal. But I was not just the muscle. I learned fast. I ended up thinking of myself as a smart crook. I picked the targets, I researched the hit, I selected the time to go it and the time to get out – play it by the stop-watch. I knew to show violence up front – maybe spill a little blood - scare the living shit out of them and they will follow orders. Collect what you can in the time allowed. Avoid bills in sequence or things that you have to fence. Get out and lay low. Don’t spend big.

Following the rules had worked for me. Right up until Hawthorn. That was where I fucked up. That was why I found myself in jail. My mistakes and the relentless pursuit of Nate Rawlins, Hawthorn County Sheriff. One thing that hammered at me the whole time that I was in jail was the thought of getting my own back on that guy.

I was facing a long stretch, so when I saw that there was a possibility of release with participation in a new form of “aversion therapy”, I decided to give it a try. The therapy was only open to violent criminals. There was me and Saus Solnick, and maybe seven other guys who were prepared to stay on after the project was explained.

Maybe twenty guys left the room when the two therapists started talking about “bringing out the feminine side” and even taking female hormones. I would have left too, had I not been sitting next to Saus. He leaned over to me and said: “I’ve got nothing to lose, so I am going to give this a go. We have a shot of getting out of here, and I’ve got things to do.”

I looked at him and I suppose I thought: ‘If he’s going to do it, maybe I should too”. He was there following a murder conviction years before, so early parole was worth chasing. I had not been inside too long, but it was long enough. I wanted to leave prison so I didn’t leave the therapy room.

Saus and I went to the weekly sessions. It was not frilly dresses and ribbons in our hair or anything like that, it was just about understanding that the origin of our violence lay in the macho male culture, and that all people have a gentler side – you just have to find it. The drugs were not about turning us into women, but a way to neutralize male chemistry.

But the fact is that after six or seven months on those drugs, your body does change, and your mind too.

Things really took off when it was decided that we needed to be separated from the general prison population. At that stage there were only six of us left including Saus and me. Some of the guys were starting to look and act like fags. I don’t mean limp wristed, but just sort of quiet and gentle, and being weaker we were less able to look after ourselves. So, for protection we were transferred to “G House”.

G House was one of eight houses within prison grounds used to prepare prisoners for release. It had four two bed cells that would lock off at night, but also a living area with a dining table and even a small kitchen. It was so much better than being in the cell-block.

I guess that this was a real sign that we might make it – we might secure an early release if we played our cards right. And that was when Saus played a wild card.

“I feel that I was always meant to be female,” he told the therapist. You could have knocked me over with a feather.

The therapist got very excited. She asked: “So what sort of woman do you think that you would be, Saus?” We all stared at him looking for the reply.

“I think that I would be a gentle and caring person,” Saus said. The look on his face was … I think the word is “whimsical”.

“We want to help you to be that person,” said the therapist. “We want you to leave your life of violence and crime behind to become a different person. A better person – if you think you could do that.”

“I would like to try,” said Saus.

And they were offering a lot of help, including removal of all of Saus’s tattoos, which was a big job.

“What are you doing?” I said to Saus, after the therapist had left and we were being cuffed for return to G House. “Are you crazy?”

“They’re going to let me out,” he said. “I know they will.” Then he added: “You should come with me. We could do this together.”

I started to ponder. The other four guys had looked at Saus as if he was out of his mind, but was he? Saus may have been tough and vicious, but he was not stupid. If he had a plan, maybe I should give it some thought. I was starting to think that there was little down-side. And if Saus was right we would both get out.

“Ok Bro,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

At the next session I told the therapist that I wanted to transition too.

In G House we were joined by two transgender people from general population who were not from the violent offender’s group, so there were four guys transitioning, and four guys just on the original program. We sort of split within the house, along those lines.

The two new guys were called Heather and Jenny. I don’t even remember what their real names were.

Saus went in for the tattoo removal. He came back with a face that looked like raw meat, but the skin on his face recovered within a few weeks. Not only was the ink gone, but also all facial hair, and his skin was smooth and soft. Heather and Jennifer virtually demanded a similar treatment. It was not really my choice, but I had to go along with it. I had a few tattoos on my arms that disappeared, and maybe they did too, but the big effect was in the change to our skin. The treatment combined with the hormones left me with the real feeling that I really had shed my original form to become somebody else, if you can try to understand that.

The rehabilitation program paid for these treatments. The removal of tattoos was seen as creating a clean slate for convicts like us. Our skin certainly was clean – face neck and arms anyway.

Heather had worked in a salon on the outside. She had been working on transitioning, but to raise the money for her future as a female she got involved in burglary, so she ended up in prison, and a men’s prison worst luck for her. But she knew all the feminine skills and she offered to help us all with hair and makeup. As a part of the program she was given access to materials to assist in this.

Jenny was very keen beautification, and so was Saus, and even one of the guys who was not in our transitioning group who called herself “Lily”. It was not really open for me to refuse. All five of us ended up with makeup jobs, manicures and hairdos. The other three guys started to feel like the program had got out of control. But with their new non-confrontational attitude, they never said anything to us. If they had, they would have been back in the general population.

I used to look at them and think that I belonged with them. They were still guys. Sure, they were softer and had flabby chests and gentler moves, but they were still male. We were not. We had definitely crossed-over to something else.

We all wore bras to lift our breasts and show them off. We had the option to wear dresses or skirts instead of prison jump suits in order to express our new femininity. It was suggested by somebody (I can’t remember who) that if we could prove ourselves as being passable as women, we might be released on parole. Certainly, the therapy staff seemed to be accepting that as kinder, gentler, feminine souls, we might no longer be a threat to society. They still had a job to convince the prison authorities. Saus suggested that we make every effort to help them.

He started to talk about what kind of work we might be pursuing once released – make it as feminine as possible, he suggested. He said that he would like to be a florist. Maybe he really did want that. He was certainly good at it. We had a garden outside the house and a vocational therapy garden in use with other prisoners, where flowers could be grown. He was studious in learning about flowers and flower arrangements.

Lily wanted to do tailoring, or rather dressmaking, including clothing design. The program furnished her with a sewing machine and training on how to use it. Cutting had to be done in a secure unit (knives and scissors were used) but she could sew at home, and we could model the things she made. That was fun.

I worked with Heather in hairdressing. I was just pretending, but it turned out that I was quite good at it. There was a lot of theory involved in it too, so Heather and I both did courses by correspondence. I started to think that when I got out, even having shed the whole transgender ruse, I might get work in a salon, it being the only trade I knew. But I had to snap myself out of that idea. Hairdressing is for fags, and I was only playacting.

But when Heather got paroled, two years earlier than scheduled, I took over as the prison stylist. I was not only doing my stuff for Saus, and Lily and Jenny, but another “girl” from our house had joined the transitioners – Phoebe. Plus we had two female staff and the wives of three male prison guards who came in to have their hair done. I was developing a reputation that extended outside. Heather visited me to tell me that she was working in a salon and that her new boss would hire me when I got out, if that is what I wanted.

Was it what I wanted? I remember that I was doing Saus’s hair, just playing around with an updo for her, and I looked in the mirror and saw myself with a comb in one hand and hairspray in the other, looking nothing like the guy I once was. Saus was chatting away in the girly voice that he was developing with a huge smile on his face, talking about how this is the kind of hairdo he would have worn to the prom. It was all so unreal that I felt as if I had been transported to some alien universe, where I was a real girl, living a happy life with not a worry in the world.

I did not want that moment to end. I saw the pretty blond girl in the mirror standing over her customer, and I saw tear roll down her face. Why a tear? Sad because it could never be? Or a tear of joy because it could be.

“What’s wrong, Baby?” said Saus.

“Do you think that we could live like this on the outside?” I asked her.

“I intend to,”Saus said. I think at that moment I understood that maybe that is what “she” intended all along. Heather definitely. Jenny probably. Lily possibly. Me?

Saus asked to see the warden. She said to him that we (she and I) were no longer the people we were when we were sentenced to prison, as they could plainly see. We were not reformed – we were transformed. The people we were now had committed no crimes and in all probability we never would. So, we humbly submitted, we should be released.

The warden was impressed. He convened the Parole Board well ahead of time and recommended parole if the therapy team would continue assessment. Once they had agreed to that, all five of the transitioners walked out the main gate: Saus, Lily, Jenny, Phoebe and me. And a new cluster took our place in G House. But we were on strict parole.

I could say that I kept up appearances when I was on the outside because I knew that I was being watched, but that would be a lie. I dressed as a woman from the skin out, day and night, everyday of the week, because after 3 years on the program that was how I was. As an ex-con I wanted to fit in, and the fact is that if I did not dress the way I looked I would not fit in. I looked like a woman.

And the whole basis for our release was that we were no longer violent men, but women, or something close to that, but certainly a long way from what we were. That was why we were roaming free. And we were free. We could go where we wanted, do what we wanted, without walls. None of us wanted to go back.

Saus and I shared an apartment as approved by our Parole Officer. I took the job at the salon with Heather. Saus, now called Susanna by herself, but Suzy by everybody else, go a job as an assistant florist on the same block as our salon.

Jenny suggested that “The G-House Girls” should set up a side business and do weddings together, a six girl team. Lily could do dresses, Suzy could do flowers, Heather and I could do hair, and Phoebe the cake, and Jenny could do the planning and organizing. It was just an approved sideline to get work for our employers, but it turned into a real business over time.

Things were not always so delightful. In alone moments Suzy still wrestled with guilt issues. But things were getting better.

“I find that I can live with myself now,” she said. “All the bad things that I have done, all the people I have hurt, that was not me. That was someone else. If I think of it that way, the guilt and the shame seem to fade away.”

Strangely, I never even gave guilt any thought at all. Not then anyway. It was not until much later, when my new life put me in close contact with victims and I found myself an unofficial victim support person, that I learned what guilt was. But even that was not an entirely unhappy experience.

Hairdressers can be an emotional crutch sometimes. People talk and you have to listen. Sometimes they ask, and you have to answer. Sometimes sympathy and wisdom just spills out of your mouth when you don’t expect it.

One customer, I will call her Kate, was a victim of armed robbery.

I had always treated the terror of my victims as a joke. It was like watching a horror movie, and looking at the fear in their faces with mild amusement, while retaining my aggressive mask to heighten the intensity, negate their rational thought, and get the job done. But to hear Kate tell her story appalled me. Perhaps it was the new me, flooded with hormones and in that house of femininity that every beauty salon represents. But somehow, I think that I was just made aware for the first time, of the other side of violence. My heart ached for her. I offered to help in any way I could.

The beginning was to make sure that she had the full salon experience. Getting her hair done was a way of coping with it all. I understood completely. I had found that in my time in jail. There is noting like stepping out of a salon to make you feel that all your problems are smaller somehow.

But she took me up on my offer the following day, and called me on my cellphone.

She said that she needed to go back for another meeting with law enforcement. She wanted support. She said that her boyfriend was no use at all. She asked whether I would go with her, as a support person, the day after that, at 1:00pm, to meet the officer in charge - Nate Rawlins, Hawthorn County Sheriff.

I had already agreed, but the mention of his name had a strange effect on me. I had spent one of my four years in prison intent on killing that man, preferably in a painful way. But the last 3 years, my years as a woman, or becoming one, I had not given him a thought. Now I was concerned that he would recognize me.

I looked at myself in the mirror to look for the features that might give me away. I could see the concern etched on my face, but I saw nothing of the old me. Nothing at all. I saw a hair out of place at the back. I tended to it with a bobby pin. I smiled and was reassured; I was not him. Not anymore.

She picked me up and we arrived at the Sherriff’s office early. But Nate Rawlins did not keep us waiting. He welcomed her in, with me as a support person. It was not the police interview room I was used to, with a table and chairs, it had soft sofas and a coffee table, for a relaxed atmosphere, and Nate Rawlins was relaxed too.

When you are on the receiving end of law enforcement you never realize how important is the role they play for victims. Here are the people who need to tell the family of the loss of a loved one, or to help them through grief and anger all the way through a criminal trial. The word is “empathy”. You have to not just show it but have it. I saw Nate Rawlins in a new light.

To be honest, I had always had a sneaking admiration for him, given his determination to bring me to justice. Now I saw that he was much more than just a highly competent cop.

It was stupid, but I felt I needed to say something to indicate that I knew him or knew of him.

“I think that you were involved in the capture of my cousin?” I said, giving him the name. “He was the black sheep of the family.”

“I remember him,” he said. “He is out now, I understand. Bitter and confused, as I remember. Even the best of families have that type”.

Bitter and confused? He was not saying that the man he remembered was bad, just misguided. Was that how I fell into a life of crime and violence? Was it because I just did not know who I was? Was I fighting myself all that time?

But I was not there to discuss my problems, but to support Kate. I just sat there silently, looking at him. I hardly heard his words, just the warmth in them. For some reason I found myself playing with my hair and pushing a loose lock behind my right ear. It caught his eye and seemed to trigger something – there was a look in his eye that I had never seen before … ever.

The session was over, and he stood, shaking Kate’s hand and assuring her that they were close to prosecuting the offender. He guided her out the door first, and as she walked to the lift he turned to me: “So, we are good?” he said. “With your cousin and everything.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “You did the right thing. Prison was the best place for him. It has changed his life. For the better.”

“I am happy to hear it,” he said. “So, I wonder if you would consider having dinner with me tonight?”

And that was how my new life began.

I had to tell him eventually, there was still a major obstruction to our life together than needed to be removed and remodeled, but by then we were both in love with one another.

And as for the other G-House Girls, well that is another story, but a happy one.

The End

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Heather on hair



Suzy on flowers



Jenny on planning



Lily on dresses



Phoebe on cakes



Me