Head Injury

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

**Part 1 - Mike**

I remember those few minutes after I regained consciousness so very well.

I opened my eyes and reached to my face. There was tube in my nose. I knew immediately where I was. I was in the hospital. But then I looked at my hand. I looked at the back of my hand and it did not look right. I found myself thinking that my hand should be beautiful. That is needed to be smooth and soft and that the nails should be shaped and polished.

What guy thinks that way? Hands are for work. They are used for holding tools, carrying heavy things, writing notes if needed, clenching into fists and being used as weapons, occasionally. Not things of beauty. The thought was totally wrong, but somehow, completely right.

I knew from that very minute something was amiss, and it was not just that I was in hospital.

There was a nurse walking towards me. I saw her. She stopped. She said: “You’re awake”. Which I was, of course. And then she hurried off.

The next person to appear was my wife Janis. She had not been sitting beside the bed as she later told me she had been for days – she nipped out for a coffee. She took my hand. That awful rough hand. I liked having my hand held. That was new too.

“Darling, can you hear me?”

My throat was dry, so I just nodded.

Behind her a doctor appeared. He had a tablet in his hand. He said to me: “Mr Norrie, you’ve been in an accident. Do you know where you are?”

I pointed to the water on the bedside table and Janis lifted it to my lips so that I could sip then speak.

“I’m in hospital,” I croaked. I looked at Janis. She seemed to need reassurance that I was OK. I smiled at her and squeezed her hand. She looked at me oddly.

“Do you know what year it is?” the doctor asked.

I answered correctly. He noted it on his tablet.

“I have a few more questions,” he continued. “Are you happy to answer?”

“Shouldn’t he rest?” Janis asked.

“I’m OK honey,” I said. “Let the doctor ask his questions.”

He embarked on a series of questions such as: Who is the president? Where were you born? What is your wife’s maiden name? What is 4 + 4 + 4? The questions came and I answered them.

I must have looked confused enough for him to add: “Mr Norrie … Mike, you’ve had a head injury, so we have been a little concerned about your brain function. Now I want to test feeling and motor function. Are you up for that?”

I nodded.

Tickle the toes. Wiggle the toes. Bend the leg. Bend the arm. Touch the nose. Everything seemed to be in order. The doctor appeared genuinely surprised.

“Would you be able to walk?” he asked. “I will just disconnect these tubes.”

As I swung my legs towards the floor, I was instantly affected by what I saw. They were my legs alright but covered with black hair. Everywhere – even on the top of my feet. It was just so ugly that I almost gagged.

“Are you alright? Can you stand?”

I was. I did. I walked across the room and back again.

“Can he be discharged?” It as Janis. “Can he be discharged today?”

“Well, I am still a little concerned,” said the doctor. “Maybe just a day of two for observation.”

“Mike, what do you want?” she asked.

“Maybe just go with the doctor, Honey,” I said. She looked at me in disbelief.

“You hate hospitals,” she said. “You hate doctors.”

“Do I?” I asked her.

“This is what I am looking for,” the doctor said. “Obviously I am very pleased with your memory, cognition and motor skills, but some personality change is very common with brain injury on this scale. I just need to assess it.”

I took Janis by the hand again and said: “Maybe it’s just as well I have got over a fear of doctors. I can stay a bit while he checks me out. OK Honey?” I was touched by her concern for me. We were close, I knew that much.

She looked at me as if I was a stranger. “Sure”, she said. She kissed me on the cheek, and she left.

The doctor waited until she was gone. Then he asked me: “Is there something you want to tell me? Maybe something that you did not want to discuss in front of your wife.”

How perceptive of him. I needed to explain: “I am different. I know my wife, but now she means nothing to me. Is that unusual? Will it change?”

“I am glad that you told me,” he said. “Many people in your situation wouldn’t. This is a difficult problem and it can be hard to deal with, but it is not uncommon with brain injury. I mean it is not uncommon for relationships to fail, and it has nothing to do with memory. I remember one female patient of mine, in the very position you are in, said to her husband: ‘I have always disliked you, it just it took a brain injury to allow me to tell you’. The problem is, that from a medical point of view, we cannot say that her statement post injury is not true. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes,” I said. “Is that woman, your patient, back with her husband now?”

“No,” said the doctor. “It was a bitter divorce. But I understand that she is very happy. He isn’t. Apparently, he is broken-hearted. But then he was not my patient.” Perceptive, but quite cold.

“There is another problem,” I said. At this point I paused because I was afraid to say it. I knew it completely, but I was unsure about what the reaction to it might be. Still I felt that I had to say it, in particular after what he had just told me. I said: “I feel out of place in my body. In fact I hate this body. I know it is my body, but it is not me. I have to change it.”

The doctor looked intrigued, perhaps even excited. He asked: “What changes are you talking about.”

“I’m a woman inside, Doctor. I think that I have always known it. It is just that now, I cannot live with it anymore.”

“Interesting,” he said. “You are describing gender dysphoria. Have you any memory of raising this with any health professional before the injury?”

“I don’t know what dis-whatever is. I have no memory of ever talking about it. In fact, the memory that I have of all interactions with my doctor – and there were as few of those as I could make possible - is that I never raised it. But would that be unusual?”

“Can you point to any behavior that could confirm pre-existing gender dysphoria,” he asked. “Any cross-dressing or homosexual encounters?”

“No,” I said flatly and frankly. “But I have never been surer of anything in my life. I am a woman. A woman but not in the right body – I have a man’s body. That is not really me.”

“If you consent, I will look into your past medical records, and then I think that we will keep you in overnight. If you are still committed to this course in the morning, then I will discharge you and you can do what you wish. Even if this is a new condition, my experience is that it is not like recovering memory or cognitive or motor skills. Neural regeneration can fix that, but it cannot change personalities. Sometimes injuries change a person’s character completely and permanently, and there is not much that we can do. People need to be motivated to restore a prior personality. It requires some effort”.

“I’ll sign the consent,” I said.

“Just one more thing,” said the doctor. “I am no expert, but gender transition is a difficult and painful process. You should consider that too. It will not be an easy path.”

“I will look into it,” I told him. And it suddenly occurred to me, if I had always been like this wouldn’t I know more about gender transition than I did?

**Part 2 - Janis**

“What are you talking about?” I was angry. Who wouldn’t be? “This will be the end of our marriage. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, meekly. This was not my husband Mike. You could never use the word meek to describe any part of him or his actions. The accident seemed to have destroyed him or destroyed the mettle in him. But that was not it. He was sounding like a crazy person.

I looked across at the neurosurgeon. I asked him: “You are the head doctor. This must be brain damage. We need to have him treated so that he stops this kind of talk. He was not like this before the accident.”

“I am no expert on gender disorders,” he said. “Mike wanted to tell you in front of me so that I could explain that it seems unlikely that the accident had anything to do with this. You don’t become transgendered by receiving a knock on the head. Not to my knowledge anyway, and brain injury is my field. It would seem a distinct possibility that Mike has always suffered from this condition, but perhaps he suppressed it? That would not be uncommon. These brain injuries do cause changes in personality. Some loss of inhibitions is very common. It may be that he is now open to discussing with you something he has borne for some time.”

“I have seen a gender specialist,” said Mike softly. “He has given me a prescription for hormones and we have discuss gender confirmation surgery.”

I just stared at him, this husband of mine. We had been happy … most of the time. Now I hardly recognized him. Where was his aggressive stance, that scared me sometimes? But I married him for his strength. Where had that gone?

I turned to the surgeon again: “He has been different since he got home, but all the information that you gave me told me to give it time and he would recover. You said he would be back to normal given time,” I said, trying to hold everything together. “What is definitely not normal is my husband telling me that he wants to have his genitals removed.”

“As I understand it, Mike has not taken any steps towards transition yet. We are here to discuss the decision that he will make, with you. What I needed to do was to confirm that there is nothing physically wrong with his brain. It has healed. The changes are not madness. He is able to make his decisions. They may not be the decisions that he would have made before the accident, but he is entitled to make them.”

When doctors talk that that it drives me crazy. “There is something wrong with his brain, Doctor,” I insisted. “He goes to work as usual and something falls on his head – he ends up in hospital – and this is what comes out.”

I was pointing at Mike. It still looked like him, but weak, and with tears in his eyes. I don’t think that I ever saw Mike cry. Maybe tears of joy when our first son was born. He never cried when his father died, even with his mother sobbing in his arms.

Who was this person?

Lately he has been letting me drive. He would never do that unless he was completely drunk. He always insisted on driving. But there he was on the way back from hospital, with his hands in his lap, looking out the window. Hardly listening to a word I was saying.

Thankfully his agreed to wear pants to the appointment. I would have died if he had worn one of the dresses that he wears around the house. He says they make him feel more normal. Could there be anything more abnormal that a man in dress, plucked of every hair on his body except the growing mop on his head?

But he just will not engage with me at all. He just tells me to be calm.

There was a time when he would have slapped me down for shouting at him the way I did. I hated that about him. I knew that he called never be called a gentle person, but violence against any woman, and me in particular, is unforgivable. Yet now I almost wished that he would strike me. At least then I would know that he is in there somewhere. But I cannot see any sign of him.

**Part 3 - Calvin**

When he was still in hospital Janis called me and told me that Mike was going to make a full recovery but that there might be “personality changes”. After I had gone to see Mike in the ICU, I thought he was not going to make it, so to hear that he would be coming back to work seemed unreal. I was looking forward to it, and the staff had even prepared a welcome, complete with a “Welcome Back Mike” banner.

But it seemed to all of us that Mike never came back. It was a new person, not just a new personality.

Mike would have growled and told us to get back to work. This person saw the banner and started crying. Crying! We are a steel fabrication workshop. If there are tears that means you should be at the eyewash station.

This person was not even dressed like Mike. He was dressed like some kind of gay guy, or maybe one of those metrosexuals.

“I know I appear a little different,” he says. “The accident has called some changes, I know it has, so everybody can call me Mikki, and tell me how Mike would have done it differently, if you like. But I own the business, and I am glad to be back in charge.”

“Mikki” called me and Chip into his office to thank us for how well we had run the business in the weeks he had taken to recover. He said that when he had got in some debts due, we would get a bonus. But he said that some changes were on the way, and when he had finished outlining those it was like Chip and me had stepped onto another planet.

“I have had time to think, and make some decisions about my future,” Mikki said - Mike would never have bothered to tell anything he had planned. “I cannot hide the real me any longer, so from next week I will be permanently living as a woman.”

I looked at Chip and he looked at me, as if expecting the other to smile and laugh at the best joke we had ever heard, but Mike never joked. So was this Mike?

“Hang on Mike, or rather Mikki, so you are one of those trans people?” I had to ask.

“It looks that way, Cal,” he said. “You don’t mind working for a woman, do you? A transwoman that is?”

“Boss, I like the work and I like the pay. And I like the guys in the workshop …”. If I had been honest, I would have said that the only thing I did not like about the place was Mike, but could I say that to Mikki? In any case, it seemed that he was gone. “I am just a bit concerned about continuity of business, I guess.”

“We still have a good client list, and that won’t change if the product stays good,” said Mikki. “I know how to use the CAD program and most importantly, I know how to price. You guys don’t need me interfering down in the workshop the way I used to as Mike. That was a failure to delegate. Needing to have that level of direct control was always going to put limits on our ability to expand. I want to spend my time pushing for more business.”

There he was, talking about Mike like he wasn’t Mike. But I guess that is because he wasn’t.

“Sounds good, Boss,” I said.

We had to tell the guys on the floor, and everybody was primed for Monday, to see what walked in the door.

I have to say that we were expecting something horrific, so there was nobody who was not surprised when Mikki walked in. She (because that is what you have to call her) was not dressed like a drag queen. She had on tight jeans which showed a nice shaped lower half, and a floral top which showed off the beginnings of a pair of breasts. Mikki’s hair had been colored and curled and was held back with a bandana. There was makeup, but not overdone. Still, our new trans-girl boss was what is it very hard not to call pretty.

She had a new way of talking and a new way of walking too. That was not over done either. Both were kind of natural. It was like she said – maybe there had been a woman inside her all along.

So why did it take a knock on the head to bring about this change?

**Part 4 - Brad**

It is hard to admit it now, but I never really liked Mike. People would call us close friends because we had known one another for years. We went to high school together and played sport together. Sport make colleagues of people who would otherwise not chosen to be pals.

I went into construction and did well. Mike went into steel and did well. We married at the same time. Our wives got on. We went out for drinks with other guys from high school, and we got together with wives and kids sometimes. But Mike was a prick.

My business used his workshop for steel beams and such, because of the old connection. But I worked it so I did not have to deal with him. He would always try to screw me, so I left it to others to do the deal, or not if he tried it on. So when he had the accident, I just had my wife call Janis on behalf of both of us.

I was happy enough to hear he was back at work, but I was too busy to call in, and then I heard that Mike had experienced some kind of life change and was now turning up to work in a dress.

I have to say, when I heard that, my chin hit the floor.

I could not wait to see it, but I had no reason to call around. That would just be to stare, and I am not that kind of person. But the idea was just so crazy I started to consider how I could arrange a casual encounter.

I had my wife call Janis. She reported back: “Janis is heartbroken. Her husband has told her that he is booked in to have the penis and nuts removed. What kind of man could do that to his wife?”

“No kind of man,” was my reply. “It sounds to me like he is not really a man at all. Just think how he must be suffering. I think maybe we should reach out to him and see if he is alright.”

I am not saying that I am a liberal, or that I know anything about transgender folk, but I know enough to understand that many of these people suffer.

My wife said: “He is definitely not alright, and we are definitely not going to associate with any kind of pervert!” This was the woman I married. That mistake was becoming more and more apparent to me. It was no longer a happy marriage, if it ever had been.

What the hell? I decided that I would call Mike. I had his number on my cell. I just called. It was way after time. The guy had been out of hospital for weeks.

It seemed to me that a woman answered the phone, so I asked to speak to Mike.

“It’s me, Brad,” the voice said. “But I am so happy that my efforts towards a feminine voice are working. By the way, I go by the name of Mikki these days. Sort of neutral.”

I muttered something about being happy to hear that he had come through the accident, but I have to say that I as already confused, and it seemed that he (or she) knew that.

“I am pretty busy at work here today, but I can meet you at our old spot at 6:00 tonight if you like,” the voice said. I agreed, but I have to say that I was a bit worried that the appearance of Mike dressed as a woman would not live up to the voice on the phone.

But I was wrong. I got there on time, but she told me later that she watched me while she waited in the parking lot so she could make an entrance. And it was an entrance. She had used the word neutral to describe her name, but she was not that. She was wearing a dress, just short enough to show off long shapely and just scooped enough to show off her breasts. There was no wig on her head, but her natural hair was already longish, full, colored and curled. Somehow the square jaw that reminded me of Mike made her made-up face look even more spectacular.

“Great to see you brad,” she said, extending a manicured hand that seem so soft when I took it that I could only hold it, not shake it, as if it were a captured bird in my hand.

“Mikki,” I said. It was not a question I asked. It was an announcement. Somebody new and exciting had just stepped into my life.

“Brad,” she said back to me, with a teasing smile. “Do you approve of the new me?”

I knew then what I wanted. It should have been an unnatural desire, but to me this was not Mike, or any man. This was a woman, but something spoke to me of a freshness in her – a naivety, even virginity, if such a things exists in our world anymore.

“I want to know all about her,” I said. “The new you.”

**Part 5 - Mikki**

Isn’t that what every woman wants? A man who will listen. A man who will look at you as if he cares about you more that anything in the world, and at least appear to be listening.

The funny thing is that I hardly knew Brad, although I had known him all my life. I suppose it is because the whole time I knew him then, I was a man, and men are not interested in really knowing people at all.

That means that I really have changed. That means that I really am a woman mentally. I don’t think the same way that I did.

I feel that I need to reassure myself I suppose, because the strangest thing happened to me when I woke up after my sex confirmation surgery.

I knew immediately where I was. I was in the hospital. Brad was there beside me, holding my hand. My hand seemed so small and soft in his, but should my hand be like that?

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2020