Secrets

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Success depends on secrets. Do the big cola companies patent their formula? Does a certain chicken company register its list of herbs and spices? No. They keep them secret.

But all secrets carry the temptation to be found out. Found out and disclosed, or found out an passed on. Maybe for a profit. It is a challenge. Is it really a crime? Surely not if you do not commit a crime to do it … or maybe just a little crime?

I have always been small, and I have always looked young for my age. More than youthful – some say “childlike”. I was told that it was a hormone imbalance. It seems that a few shots of growth hormone and androgens early in high school and I could have developed just like any other guy. But my mother is religious and refused to “play around with the Lord’s work”. She said God had a plan for me. Well only He knows what that is. I have no idea.

High school was not so bad. I used to have fun pretending to be a small kid. I even pretended to be a girl once or twice. I could get away with it. I became very good at pretending. You can always make friends if you have a special gift. That was mine.

I had a girlfriend in high school – the only girl smaller than me. We were called “The Midgets”. We laughed about it, she and I. What else can you do?

I was also fascinated by secrets. I read any book which had the word “Secret” in the title. When I heard about a secret I was driven to find out more. Some might call it obsessive, but I prefer focused or driven as adjectives. It was my thing.

Straight out of school I found that I could turn my skills into well-paying work. I joined a large corporate working in what was called “Deep Research”. It was intelligence gathering. Corporate espionage. I just lucked out in finding something that suited me.

I worked undercover to gain information. I started by getting access to offices all over the city as a delivery boy or “the lost kid”. I would say: “My name is Billy and I am here to visit my father, such and such”. Nobody ever turns away the kid. They give you access to the lift and then … you’re in.

I did great work. But when you look like I do, people don’t take you seriously. My results were exceptional, and I was not afraid to point it out. I may be small, but I am not timid. I expected a promotion based on the work I had done. It never seemed to happen. I was just “The Kid”.

I was using my unusual appearance to advantage, but that same appearance was leading me to be overlooked. It was exasperating.

Then the NetDyne takeover came up, and I was in a position to name my price if I could get the data that was needed. The problem was that the data was stored at the home of the president, Jeremiah Swinson, and that home was an impenetrable fortress, a mansion in the Hamptons. How could we get somebody in?

I found out about Swinson’s daughter Millie. My employers never knew that I could pass myself off as a girl, let alone a teenage girl. I told my bosses about my plan and they agreed that if I could get the data, I would be made Senior VP of my unit – the Deep Research Division (DRD), basically the corporations industrial espionage arm.

My employer had the resources I needed. Entry into Millie’s private girl’s school could be obtained with the assistance of an influential client of the firm. An identity came from another client, and a place to stay from another. And all I needed to do was appear female.

I decided that I would take hormones, just to get into character. This could be done by a slow release implant concealed in small breasts inserted under the skin of my chest. Then I would need another little surgical procedure to make me appear female even when naked – nothing permanent – it seemed advisable, just in case. Then there was just a makeover - undetectable hair extensions, facial treatment, and a body waxing.

As I said, I am good at pretending, but I needed a little coaching on presentation. That including watching teen movies and actual film of teenage girls with other teenage girls. I had to get the language and behavior right.

I had a cover story including my wealthy parents living overseas, and another family I was boarding with very close to the Swinson Estate. Plus, I had done the research on Millie. I knew what she liked and how to become her friend. I was confident that I could do it.

The plan was that I would attend her school, make friends with her, and then be invited into her home – she was known to have regular sleepovers and parties. I gave myself a few weeks to do this, but as it was, I met Millie on my first day, and she was almost immediately my friend.

I could say that it was because of my research and how I used that, but the truth was I liked her myself, from the first moment we met. She had an energy and zest for life that was just infectious. I have to say that when we started laughing and giggling together, I was not pretending. I just got caught up in the moment. I wondered if it was the hormones.

But I never lost sight of what I was there for, and what I needed to do.

The advantage of appearing much younger than you are is that you can use your experience of life to understand and influence people. I cold cultivate a friendship with Millie, but also get close to her other friends to ensure that my position within her inner circle was solid. Still it was a few weeks before I was invited to her home for the first time. That meant living and breathing life as a high school girl, 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Patience is important.

I always used to say that undercover work cannot affect you, but this time it did. I was really enjoying myself – not just pretending. It was like a vacation. You step out of your job and the stresses of that and empty your head of almost everything except being pretty and learning how to be prettier.

I am not wanting to be dismissive of high school girls, but it seemed to me that this was a time in their life that was fairly cruisy. I did not menstruation and boyfriends to worry about, and schoolwork presented no challenge because I had done it all before. We just had our simple pleasures, and lots and lots of talking.

The other big difference for me, when looking back and my own time in high school, was that I was universally accepted. Rather than being a freak I was just like everybody else, except maybe prettier.

I think that being attractive is not only about the shape of your body, the size of your eyes, and the angle of your cheekbones, it is about how you carry yourself. Millie was pretty and so were her other friends, but I like to think that the way I looked and behaved made me more alluring somehow. You can call it self-confidence if you like. Certainly I looked down on high school boys. I was one once. I found them awkward and rather pathetic.

Of course, I could not be a lesbian or frigid. I told my girlfriends about the guys I could go out with. We talked about boys all the time.

The first couple of times at Millie’s house gave me no real opportunities, but finally Millie invited everybody to one of her regular sleepovers. This would give me my chance to explore the house after everybody was in bed.

We had been curling each other’s hair and playing with makeup before we went to bed. As we got into our nightwear, I arranged for everybody to have a nightcap of some fruit tea into which I had slipped a mild soporific. They all went to bed before me and were sound asleep when the time came for me to slip downstairs. I wanted to wear something dark, so I found a black lace peignoir cost to slip over my pretty pink nightie. I slipped on some ballet pumps and crept downstairs.

I knew where Jeremiah Swinson’s study was. It was more of a library, with bookshelves, sofas by the window, a reading alcove and a large desk with the desk lamp the only light on. The room seemed dark and quiet, so I focused on checking the desk. It seemed just incredibly good luck that there was a folder of NetDyne documents near to the top of a pile on the desk.

I was just about to get my phone out when I heard something behind me.

“What do you think you are doing, young lady?” It was a voice coming from with darkness. I turned to see that the armchair in the alcove was occupied. Mr. Stimson had been sitting there in silence, quite probably watching me rifle through his papers. He rose and walked over to switch on the main light.

Imposters like me have to think on their feet. I said: “I hate to admit it Mr. Stimson, but I was looking for a cigarette.” I don’t even smoke. It just seemed to be something that might bring a schoolgirl into an adult’s room.

His face broke into a smile. He was a good-looking man. In his early fifties I guessed, but he could have been much younger. He looked fit and strong. He said: “I’m sorry. I only smoke cigars. But if you don’t tell Millie I am sure that we could both have a smoke together.”

“I guess I could try it.”

“I love your look,” he said. “Spectacular”.

I had not even thought about it, but now I had to see. I went across the room to a small mirror on the wall. My hair, which had been grown for the role, had been curled and sprayed with a shiny lacquer, and my make up included painted wings and false lashes. I would have taken my makeup off before bed, but after I had knocked out the girls, I was keen to get the job done first.

I did look great. So good that I would have turned myself on, I think, were it not for the troubling situation I was in.

While I was admiring myself, he prepared two cigars and motioned me to come over to the window, which he opened.

“Millie does not like me smoking inside,” he explained. “Since her mother died, she takes charge of such things. Come and sit with me and we will puff out into the evening.”

I needed to play this, even though I was not looking forward to smoking. “Sure”. Somehow having seen my face in the mirror I found myself moving in a sensual way, if that is the correct word.

“You seem young to be smoking,” he said, lighting my cigar.

I spluttered, before saying: “I am older than I look.”

“I had a feeling that you might be,” he said. “It seemed to me that you know what you are looking for.”

“I don’t understand?” But of course, I did.

He did not drive home his advantage. He puffed on his cigar with ease. I was having trouble with mine. It seemed to need a strong suck, but I did not want the smoke in my lungs.

“It’s a beautiful evening,” he said. “And here I am with a beautiful young woman. Contemplating a quite beautiful possibility.”

Now I really did not understand.

“I assume that are looking for some information, so I would propose to give you some to take away,” he said. Not everything you need, but enough to get your client’s part way in, whoever they might be…”.

“I’m sorry Mr. Stimson. I don’t understand.”

“Call me Jerry,” he said. “And you must be Patience, the new girl.”

“I am just a friend of Millie’s. I am sorry for going through your desk. And thank you for the cigar, but I think it a little strong for me. I really don’t know about any other stuff.”

“Please don’t play games with me, my Dear,” he said. “I have been in business a long time. I know what you were doing. I would be angry, but you are disarmingly attractive, and … well, I am thinking of a scenario where we might be able to work together, you and me. Would you like that.”

Anybody in my position has to know the law. Since 1997 the theft of business information has been a federal crime in the United States, and a serious one. That means up to 10 years in jail for an individual like me, and a fine of up to $5 million dollars for my corporate client.

“Sure, why not. I would like to work with you, Jerry. But I am still not admitting to anything except looking through your desk for a cigarette.”

“Quite right,” he said. “Don’t admit anything, not even your age. But would you be old enough to share some Armagnac with me? It goes well with a cigar as good as this.”

“I am old enough.” I was. He poured out two glasses and we talked into the night.

In fact it was late when I snuck back into the slumber party so that I could wake with the girls. We cooked pancakes for breakfast and as polite girls should, we offered to cook for the host, Millie’s father. And as polite fathers must, he gratefully accepted the offer and the pancakes.

“I have met Patience, the new girl, so I guess I know all of you,” he said, but he was looking at me, smiling knowingly. I decided that the best policy was to giggle and to regress into a girlish and childlike state for the duration of my stay, although we had agreed on what was to happen.

I should have dropped out of school the Monday following, but I just arranged to be excused for medical reasons. I needed to report the DRD and to provide the information that I had.

I should also have dropped my disguise, with the job done, but I did not. Instead when cruising the mall with my teenage associates I had found and purchased some clothes to buy. While the others had bought casual or sportswear, or just junk, I had selected something more mature, I said: “To have lunch with my uncle in the city.” That was what I wore on Monday, together with hair tied up and carefully applied makeup.

There was surprise but flattering compliments about my appearance, which was strangely pleasing.

“I will keep the disguise going for the time being,” I explained. “I suggest that if you are going to move on the information I have, I should stay imbedded so as not to raise suspicion, and it will allow us to observe the outcomes.”

Our client was pleased. While stressing the I was operating in difficult circumstances I had cellphone images of several pages of apparently current information. For them it resolved that they must be a competing party in the takeover of NetDyne, even if that meant driving the price up. They were ready to act immediately, based on the information on the top of Jerry Swinson’s desk pile.

But as Jerry had said, I was not to know that he was one of those old-fashioned company directors who believed in reading his material in chronological order. New material was always put at the bottom of his pile. The spy was not to blame if, given the surreptitious nature of the work, I could not explore in full. I stood ready, still undercover, to investigate further. It was their call. And Jerry had guessed that my client would be impetuous and greedy.

I went back to school on Tuesday.

“You made an impression on my father,” said Millie. “He said that as you are on your own I should invite you around for dinner and you could stay over.”

“Only if you and I can watch chick flicks together,” I said. I had become strangely interested in the things I had only pretended before.

The three of us sat down to dinner.

“I have had a very busy day,” said Millie’s father. “I have sold a company for much more than it was worth.”

Millie appeared bored with any comment about commerce, so I pretended to be too. But I winked at Jerry and he smiled.

“Rather than bed down in Millie’s room, I have set aside one of our guest rooms for you, Patience,” he said. But I never used it.

“I should explain that I am a deceiver in every sense of the word,” I explained.

“Tell me your secrets,” he said, stroking my hair. “I promise not to tell a soul.”

Well, I am not a schoolgirl. I am not a teenager – I left that behind some years ago. These are not real breasts. And, in fact I am not even female.”

“Oh my God,” said Jerry Swinson. “You are simply the most exotic and mysterious woman I have ever met, but female or not, I am convinced that you are a woman.”

“I could be in time,” I said.

“I have Patience,” he said.

The End

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