Damsel in This Dress

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I was one of those people who believed that I could handle everything, until one day I discovered that I could not handle anything at all.

It started with headaches. Initially they were the kind that you could pop a pill to put them aside, but then I got those head splitting things that they call migraine attacks that force you to sit in a still darkened room to get any peace. It seemed as if it could not get worse, but it did.

The doctor told me that it was stress. There were a dozen names and acronyms, but it boiled down to the brain and the body telling me that I had reached a limit. Drugs would not help, unless they were the kind that sent me into a fantasy world that did not exist. If I wanted to stay in the real world, I would have to find a way to relax.

“I have seen this before, Mr. Damisill,” the doctor said. “If you go on like this you will be dead within a couple of years. You need to remove the stresses from your life or find a way to cope with them.”

I asked him for ideas. He had a complete list – everything from “Art Therapy” (you paint something with others) to yoga (you twist your body into knots, with others).

“I have excluded some that might not meet your ‘real world’ requirement,” he said. “But here is a new one – crossdressing de-stressing therapy or CDD. Apparently, some early empirical data shows that it is surprisingly effective. It is not in the list, but it would go here, just above crystals.”

It just struck me how stupid the idea or staring at crystals was. Most of it seemed to be nonsense. I did not want to go through the whole list starting at A, or up from Y. Why not go for the newest? Why not try CDD Therapy. It seemed just as daft as any other. He had a web address. I took it.

The website seemed to quite professional and had pictures of smiling men in wigs and makeup and ill-fitting dresses. I have to say that I sniggered. At the bottom were testimonials, and my eye fell on one particular line:

“CDD Therapy has freed me from a huge burden, and I feel free at last – Corbyn, Carlsbad”

I knew Corbyn, or somebody with that name and that spelling, in Carlsbad. Could it be the same guy? I just had to call him. I just said that I was having some issues and I asked him whether he had ever heard of CDD Therapy?

“Oh, Buddy, you have to try it if you are stressed,” he said. “Honestly, it really works. Why don’t I line you up a session? I can come with you.”

Corbyn was a regular guy, just like me. I suppose I thought that here was a guy who can dress up like these others one night a month or whatever, and otherwise is just a regular guy – like me. So I said yes. I said that I was ready to go with him, that very night.

I was surprised that it was a wellness center. You know the thing, it had a number of health and beauty treatments, a store with products, and a room simply labelled: “Therapies”.

Corbyn and I were there, and two other guys, and the therapist – a woman - Her name was Brigid.

“It is always better to have a group,” she said. “Especially when we have a new participant, just to help her through. We always refer to one another by our femme names and using the female pronoun, so what is your femme name?”

She was looking at me, and then they all were. I had not given it any thought. I am not sure where the name “Sophie” came from. It jumped into my head and then just as suddenly it was on my lips. Corbyn was Karalyn and the other two “girls” were Olivia and Susan.

It seemed that they could not wait to get dressed and I went along with things. But it was clear who was the beginner – the one with the hairy legs. It surprised me that Karalyn had smooth legs.

“Don’t worry,” said Brigid. “If you need male legs for sport or something, you can just wear heavy tights. Hairy legs are very unfeminine, and this therapy is about getting to know your feminine side – a less stressful side.”

“Is that true?” I had to ask. “I know a lot of women who stress. In particular at a certain time of the month. I am not wanting to be insensitive but isn’t it a fact that the menstrual cycle causes stress?”

“You don’t understand the menstrual cycle but men don’t.” Her smile could have been patronizing but it wasn’t. “Let me explain. The menstrual cycle is in three phases. The first phase is called the follicular phase and estradiol rises. That can help reduce the effects of the stress hormones, mainly adrenaline and cortisol. This phase is the happy time of the month. Then there is the ovulatory phase when libido rises with male hormones, and then the luteal phase is definitely a downer. Ladies like you have the advantage of enjoying a perpetual follicular phase. Some even add estradiol”.

“I do,” said Olivia raising her hand as she adjusted her stuffed bra with the other. “It has been a godsend. Just a measured dose, so changes are not substantial”.

At the time it meant nothing. I had never heard of estradiol or the three phases of a woman’s cycle.

The others helped me to get dressed. There were a variety of clothes available. Some of them may have been picked up at a charity store. Some were donations from past participants. That was what I had. Some of the people there had brought their own outfits to wear.

Brigid said it was my first lesson – women love working in teams and helping one another to be their best. That was not me at all. I was strictly a lone wolf at work, ready to kill and eat up anything in my path to the top. I certainly noticed it.

But even more than that I noticed that somewhere in the dressing up process I changed. It was a feeling that was totally unexpected.

I said that I went in with an open mind. Maybe I did, but for me it was an even bigger joke that all of the other “new age” therapies on that list. I was going to try no to laugh so I could see it through, but not because I was worried about upsetting anybody – just because it would allow me to see it through. The man I was not interested in offending the other “girls”. And then suddenly I was concerned. Suddenly they did not look ridiculous. I did, in those tights. Suddenly them helping me to look good made sense. Suddenly I saw the potential in my reflection. I could look so much better. I could actually look like a woman, if that is what I wanted.

“Now we are going to watch a fashion show on the screen I have set up,” said Brigid. “I want you ladies to give me your opinion of the garments and the shoes and the look each of the models is presenting. Ask me to freeze it if you like. Just remember – you are women tonight so any other thoughts must be cleared from your minds.”

You might think this ridiculous. I would have done too. But everybody was excited by the idea and somehow I was too. There was another lesson here – among women excitement is contagious. Pleasure can be too.

I am not sure how much I contributed to the fashion thing, but I loved it. I learned a lot, but most of all I learned that beauty is the goal. If it is, then nothing else really matters. You can do everything you want to do but be beautiful doing it. I can be a way of life.

We sat around and talked afterwards. I did not say a word, but Sophie chattered on like a real person. I just let her go. If I was inside her I was neutralized or moribund. I was at peace.

I talked and giggled as we got undressed. It was great. And then I found myself standing and looking at a man in the mirror. A very sad man.

It was good for me. Okay, so I walked away with some sadness, but the experience had somehow broken the downward spiral of depression. I was at least on the level, and I could work my way up.

I suppose that I functioned well for the rest of that week. Then I started to think about another session of CDD Therapy. I figured that if I could use it selectively it could help me manage my life. But I should I shave my legs?

I suppose even that thought might show that I was headed in a strange direction. It was just that the other three girls had worn summer dresses, and I thought my legs were better shaped that theirs.

I got off work early so I could take a bath and just do it. It was only supposed to be the legs. Somehow, I just went overboard. It seemed like the removal of all body hair was not about looking like a woman, but about have a body as smooth as the proverbial baby. Like a new-born embarking on a fresh life - one full of promise and not burdened by promises broken and dreams not realized.

Or that is what I told myself. But when I played with my chest and checked out my rear end it was just to see how good I might look in women’s clothes.

I had a vision of the right outfit. I had good legs and I wanted to show them. Up top I was lacking, but I needed a bust. My shoulder were not broad but were muscled, so I needed half sleeves. There might be something in the grab bag at the therapy room, but I did not want to chance it. And I would need the right shoes to match. It seemed like a good idea to get a pair that fitted perfectly.

I went to the mall just before I headed off to the wellness center. It was quite close. I saw just the thing I was looking for in the window of a boutique. Actually, it was not quite the thing, but almost. I had to browse through a few racks of clothes.

“Would you have this is my size?” I asked. It just came out as naturally as if I had been just another shopper at that store. It was only after I had said it that I realized how ridiculous it must sound coming from the mouth of a man. But the assistant just smiled and went out the back to find what I needed.

I had intended to be more careful at the shoe store, but how can you be? It has to fit. You need to put both on. You need to roll up the legs of you pants and check it is profile and from behind.

“You have such beautiful legs,” the shop assistant said. “It must be so awful that you have to wear pants all day.”

She was right. She seemed entirely genuine and just a little sad, as if to say to me that legs as good as my should not be hidden. As I stood there, I felt somehow stronger. I was taller in heels, and I had legs that drew attention. It was empowering.

I hurried to the center, but had to wait around for the others. I could hardly restrain myself. I wanted to get out of these clothes. They seemed almost like filthy slime all over me, that I needed to wash away with something feminine and beautiful.

When I was dressed, all of the others burst into spontaneous applause. The outfit was perfect. I did not even bother with a wig, just some makeup. I was a woman with short hair. A beautiful woman.

“Tell me more about this estradiol”, I said to Olivia. “I feel as if I want to get some.”

“You’ll need to see a doctor to get a prescription,” she said. “But I can give you the name of mine. There is a process to go through, but I can tell you what to say. Just be careful. If you go too far there can be changes that might be difficult to reverse.”

It was supposed to be a therapy. Just a therapy. You might say that this is where I went over the edge. I mean, not just turning up at this this doctor’s place and reciting something that I then believed was not me at all to get drugs that I did not need, but also by ignoring what Oliva had said and taking the full dose. You might say that was when it ceased to be about the stress and became something else.

But that was not true. It was the fact that I started leaving my home dressed as a woman, not to go to the wellness center for CDD - crossdressing de-stressing therapy, but to go shopping, and just be female. It was the fact that I was growing my hair and increasingly turning up to work in clothes that might be called “gender neutral”.

But what really pushed me out of CDD and into TGR – transgender reality - was Sandor. I just met him at the mall. I had been there to have my hair done and I just stopped for a cup on coffee in the open air plaza. I was wearing something nice – something that allowed me to push the soft flesh on my chest into an alluring cleavage, and my dress had a high hem to show off my best assets. I knew that I looked good and that made me feel good.

I remember thinking at that very moment that the headaches and the depression that they were a symptom of, were now just distant memories. It seemed to me that it was not just about being somebody else for some small part of the week and allowing a release which you might then feed off for a few days. I had found satisfaction in just leaving the person I was completely behind.

“Is this seat taken?” Before I even looked up I looked around to see that there were empty tables all about me. The obvious answer might have been to point that out, but then I looked up and saw his face, and I found myself motioning him to sit.

Sandor is a Hungarian name, as he explained it to me. He had only a very slight accent, but he had a mode of behavior that was delightfully European – something old fashioned and yet very modern and progressive at the same time.

He took me to dinner. He did everything but charm the panties off me, which was just as well considering the unpleasant surprise they contained. But it made me realized that I wanted to be desired like that. I felt as if I had never been truly desired as a man – that was for the type of man that I could never be. But as a woman I could be as beautiful in the eyes of others as I was in my own eyes – if that makes any sense.

Even if he had walked out the following week on our third date, when I told him my awful truth, I think I probably still would have gone on to become the person I am today, but the fact that he stayed just made me accelerate my plans.

“My Darling, I am sure that any of nature’s cruel mistakes can be corrected … with my help,” he said.

It was all a cruel mistake. I had carried the burden of that mistake for so long that I just thought that life was supposed to crush you like that. And then CDD took away a few pounds and made life a little lighter, and then living in neutral territory lighter still. And all it took was to cut away those last lead weights that hung to drag me down, and I would be free.

And then just one more thing for me to become truly weightless – the day Sandor says to me, in his quaint European way: “Miss Damisill, would you please agree to be my wife?”

Yes, yes, a thousand times yes.

The End

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*Erins suggested: A man suffers from terrible headaches and the doctor says it is stress and he has to find a way to relax or it is going to kill him. The man has a friend who is a crossdresser and says it is great stress relief. When he tries he is amazed at how much better he feels … but crossdressing is not enough for him, especially when he acquires a great boyfriend! A bit like my story "Thai Plastic" but it seemed to me this was worth its own telling.*