Destiny

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

It seems so commonplace today that to explain to somebody that your father now lives as a woman called Florence is unlikely to surprise people the way it used to.

“Oh yes, I still stay in touch with Florence. We even have Christmas and Thanksgiving together every couple of years. Mom got over it a long time ago. I mean people get divorced all the time – right? And in this case, there was still love between them even when they did. Mom has just moved on and so has Florence. She married Henry. Yeah, we went to their place last Christmas. He has kids from before. Good kids - good people. It’s great … all cool. Happy times.”

I always thought that my father’s father, I mean Florence’s father, had died in World War 2. Florence was born in 1942 and I thought that her father never came back. There were a bunch of medals but no grandfather. Instead, my grandmother had a companion who I was always thought was a cousin of the same surname as us. We just called her “Nan” and she lived with my grandmother “Gran”. That was what I thought until they both died within a couple of weeks of each other, a few years ago.

I offered to go to with Florence to Gran and Nan’s to help sort things out. As it happened, we sorted out a lot of things on that trip. We were going through medals and for the first time I saw a picture of Gran’s husband in a wedding photo. She looked a bit like Florence and a whole lot like Nan.

“Family likeness here,” I said. “Nan could be his sister rather than a cousin. So where does she fit on the family tree that you have over there?”

Florence had found a handwritten document purporting to be our family tree, but she could see that I was wrestling to work things out.

“You should know,” said Florence. “It is just that this has been like a family curse, which you seem to have broken. I mean you are approaching middle age and you seem to be fine, so I guess I can explain.”

“What are you talking about?” I had no idea. Was it some kind of congenital disease my family had been keeping from me? I have to say that I was worried.

“Nan was your grandfather,” said Florence – just like that. “She was like me. A woman in a man’s body. Transgender. They used Transsexual more in those days.”

“Wow!” That was all I had to say. I just unrolled the family tree again. I had to get my bearings.

“If you are looking there, you will find more. I haven’t taken much notice of it I have to say, but if you look here, I can show you that this is more than a couple of generations. Look here, your great-grandfather married your great grandmother and then here, remarried Robert Young – she became a wife. And going up one here – your great great-grandmother remarried because her husband became a woman and took up with somebody else. None of this was legal in those days, but as they say – love will find a way.”

“How far back are we talking?” I was in disbelief.

“I heard 15 generations, maybe 350 years – but I don’t know how true that is,” said Florence. “But it looks like it may have all stopped with me.”

I just felt sick to my stomach. Not because I had learned something that had shocked me to the core, but because something that seemed to have been clawing at me and maybe this was the reason. If you had asked me “Do you feel transgendered like your father” before that moment I would have said “definitely not”. But the truth was that I had always felt dislocated – as if somehow this was not my life I was living – that I was destined to do something else - or be somebody else.

At the time I was forty-four, married with two sons. For them I was a complete man, and I wanted them to be men like that, and not like Florence. But that was before I knew all of this.

“How did it happen for you Florence?” I asked. “When were you aware?”

“It was like a family thing,” she said. “I always knew about it. I just thought that if I kept it from you then you would not feel that you were destined to be the same. We know about transgendered people now. I knew when I transitioned. My father only found out after Christine Jorgensen transitioned. He followed her by a few years.”

“And before that? Your father’s father? 15 generations, you say?” I was aghast, but yet something in me told me that this should be no surprise to me at all.

“Before my father’s time, the men of our line most probably disappeared, and re-emerged somewhere else as women,” said Florence. “That was the only way to do it, back then. That is why it was so hard for your Nan to construct this family tree, and why it only goes back so far. It must have been very difficult back then, without surgery or hormones. Even in my time it was hard, but just when it becomes easy, it seems that it has ended.”

“So, this is not going to happen to me?” I needed to hear him say it, even though it now seemed clear that he did not know me at all.

“Well, if you have never felt female then you are not like your forbears. And your son Stanley should be the same.”

At that time Stan was about 8 and I remembered him wearing a short dress of his mother’s as an evening gown. I told him to change. I know that directing gender behavior is not the pattern these days but given that my father was trans I guess I was sensitive. I thought that it was his grandfather’s example only. I had no idea of this apparent genetic transgender condition.

But now that I knew, it seemed to have thrown me into a major confusion. I had spent my whole life trying to be the man that I thought my father wanted me to be. Had he been subtly pushing me in that direction? Had he been setting a strong masculine example to ensure that “the family curse” ended with him? He had always seemed to be masculine – at least until he announced that he was leaving to be come Florence. He had always led me to believe that the male life was my life.

If I had strange thoughts or impulses in my youth, I buried them where they were inconsistent with my vision for myself – perhaps his vision too. Little things like an admiring glance at a dress or a hairdo could so easily be explained as my attraction to women, but even with my own wife that had never seemed as sexual as perhaps it should have been.

Transgendered? That could never have applied to me. I had some issues at the back of my mind, but I did not need to explore them, let alone dwell upon them, so long as I got on with the business of being a man.

Clearly the arrival of Florence had been a shock to all of us (although I later discovered my mother had some prior knowledge) but it did not bring about any introspection in myself. Why should it? It’s a thing that seems – like I said – commonplace these days. The reaction is shared by many – shock followed by some amusement and perhaps anger, but then acceptance that a person’s life is their own to live.

Now suddenly as we sat on the floor in Gran and Nan’s house it seemed that my life was not mine at all, but I could not figure it out.

Florence opened an old suitcase, and it was full of old clothes.

“Look at these outfits,” she said. “They are in such good condition and so beautiful. The fifties were such a stylish time, don’t you think? Maybe you could sell these to a retro shop? These styles have come back.”

There was a color photo of Nan in one of the outfits with her hair styled and makeup on. She looked youthful and gorgeous. You could see the trace of the man in the other photo – the one in uniform with the medals on – but she looked so happy. Seeing the images side by side showed the before and after – the man driven by duty, somber and resigned, and the woman, free and happy. My heart seemed to do a somersault.

“Can I leave you with this?” said Florence. “Henry is coming to pick me up. He wants to take me out to dinner and dancing. I am sure that you can finish on your own. Everything is pretty much boxed up.”

“Sure,” I said. I went with her to the door and watched Henry step out of his car to hug and kiss her and wave to me before driving away. Florence was laughing. She would soon be dancing

I looked at myself in the mirror in the hall as I stepped back inside. When had I last laughed like that? And yet there was the family likeness in my face, passed down from father to son - the big eyes, high cheek bones and small nose – more hair that most men my age, and less beard. It could be a woman’s face. I could look like Florence, but much younger, or like Nan in the fifties.

I had never had the urge to dress up as a woman. Even at that point, that was not what it was about. It just seemed to me that if I wanted to explore this strange part of my family history, now was the time to do it. Everything was here, and I was alone. Who was I? Was there another me just below the surface – a female me?

And there was the suitcase and the clothes.

I just felt that I needed to find out. Everything was there – garments to give shape, stockings that conceal my unshaven legs - some makeup, and even a wig. If I looked awful it would simply be so easy to laugh and put it all away. I hoped that would be the case, or I think I did.

But as I handled the clothes my hands began to tremble. It was like I knew that I was like the crab entering the pot he can never escape from. The needlework was so neat, and the fabric so soft, and it was just wonderful to the touch that I needed to know what it would be like to wear it.

The dress fell so perfectly. The shoes fitted too. The stockings were almost fully perished but they held on for this one day. If I was going to apply a touch of lipstick I would need to find a mirror. The strange thing was that it went on as if I had applied lipstick every day of my life. I had watched others do it, but this was not like that. It would have been so easy to make a mess. The eyeliner and mascara too. If it had been smeared on by a man I would look awful and that would be that.

She was looking back at me from the mirror.

Was it destiny? It had to be. It was not a thrill I felt, it was a realization and a deep sense of being at home, for the first time in my life.

Destiny. That was who I was.

I just walked around the house for hours just being her. Then I had a bath and shaved my body and after trying on a few more of Nan’s retro outfits I went to bed in one of Nan’s nighties.

I called Florence in the morning.

“You sound different,” she said.

“I am different,” I said. “It is just that I am the one who can live in denial the longest. But I can’t deny it any more. It didn’t stop with you Florence. Just as it was your destiny it is mine. I want to be known as Destiny from now on.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“How sure were you? Yes, I am sure.”

I started to wonder whether the same fate lay ahead for my son Stanley. But surely it must end with him. In these days transkids never get to be parents as they transition young. Perhaps I could have done that too, but I wanted so much to be a man.

Now that I understood that I could never be that, I had a wife to explain all this to, and that would not be easy.

But you can’t stand in the way of Destiny, as she was to discover.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2022

*Erin’s Seed: “A young man researching his family finds out that for the last 350 years, his ancestors have been changing sex shortly after having a child - is it genetics or a family curse?*