Summer Assignment

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The purpose of the exercise was to have my students deliver something different rather than just another round of exercises in creative writing of fiction. To focus them I chose the theme of “cultural taboos”. I wanted them to focus on something that could be described as that, and then deliver to me a treatise in three parts. Firstly I wanted some facts which are easily obtainable, but needed to be presented in their own prose; secondly I wanted them to attempt to describe its effect on people; and thirdly I wanted some attempt to rationalize the taboo. Fiction is fine, but for the summer assignment I was looking at facts, then conjecture and then reasoning.

I had a good mixture of students, but a class of 35 is way too large. I suppose that I should be gratified that my class was popular, but I believe that the kind of English I teach is needed. Literature can be an area of pure study, but language is there to be used. We mine our materials from literature, and we then mold or hammer it into shape. Never let it be said that there is no place in simple communication for a turn of phrase that tells all and fastens in the mind.

I was expecting good material from my best students, and teachers always hope that one of those less noticeable students might come forward with something special. Less noticeable might describe K J Barnworth, but invisible might have been even better.

The name meant nothing to me. I picked it up and started to read. The taboo was cross-dressing – more specifically women dressed in men’s clothes. Why is that a taboo? What is the remedy that an unspoken law against seeks to remedy in a society, primitive or civilized? Is it to prevent men from backing out of conflict, or is it to protect men from being deceived and embarrassed? What clothes in various cultures mark the feminine? I read on.

I found myself wondering – ‘who is K J Barnworth’. I had assumed that this student was male, but then I started to have doubts. I went to the class list to check. Given name – K J. No full name so no help there. Under current policy there is a box that allows for students to choose gender and preferred form of address, but K J’s was blank. There was no answer there. I started to feel that this person might be female after all. I felt foolish that with all my experience in reading and writing I could not tell, but why should I? Is gender really that visible on the page?

What was clear was that there was something in what was being written about celebrating women’s clothing. It spoke of men’s clothing as being largely a uniform – a sameness that included all men in a style less trudge through life as one of many, rather than a daily statement of expression that is a mark of creativity and difference. Surely K J must be a woman?

If I was looking forward to the first day of term it was in no small part because I wanted to meet this woman. I found myself trying not to put this thought foremost in my mind. Is seemed irrational and unprofessional, and it was.

I stepped into class and I plonked the stack of assignments in front of me. I did not want to start with hers. There were a couple of others front the front rankers – the people who are forever waving their arms at me and blurting out little shitballs of wisdom. I said their names one by one and watched them beam smugly.

“But this one deserves the top mark,” I said holding up the relatively slim paper. “Where are you K J Barnsworth?”

Those in the front, mentioned or otherwise, turned around to face the tiers of faces as if I had identified a traitor in their midst for them to seize, hang, draw and quarter.

At the back a figure stood and gingerly raised an arm. I was disappointed. It was a young man. He wore the uniform. Sweatshirt, jeans and trainers. Dull. Male. A mystery still.

I asked all three of the best to see me afterwards and arrange a one on one tutorial, and I went through all three of their papers with the whole class, critically dismembering the prose as I do, in order to impart the secrets of language to the masses. It was a good lesson. The assignment had been successful, and for those who fell short understanding why the three I had chosen were good, was laid out with some skill, if I may say so of myself.

After the class the two in front came to make a time to see me, and then with the entire lecture room empty save for us, K J Barnsworth came forward.

I started to wonder again – was this student male or female. Dressed as a young man, this could just as well have been a woman with the longish hair and the big eyes.

I opened my diary and suggested a date, but I had to say something.

“Your paper gripped me,” I said. “I try to teach students how to write words that have that effect, but I think what came through is that for some the desire to dress as a woman is worth almost any risk, for some. I cannot help but ask whether what you wrote comes from some personal experience. I am not being judgmental – just curious.”

“It’s just thoughts,” he said. I say ‘he’ because it was a young man’s voice, and yet it might no be – it was so soft rather than high.

Then it came to me. I had an image of this young man dressed as a woman. I looked at him and seemed to change sex in front of me. It was most disconcerting. I have always believed that the minds ability to paint pictures from the cues that worlds give is a valuable tool, but this seemed verging on erotic delusion. I had to shake myself.

“Never dressed … as a woman … not ever?” Why did I have to ask?

“No.” But in my mind I detected a sigh – a sadness.

“I am going to give you a top grade for this. It will be a graduation grade I can tell you. But I am curious as to how much better you might express the thought in your paper if you were to experience things as you have thought about them. Would you mind if I proposed an experiment? It is not just science that uses experimentation. Art does too. Artists do. Writers. Would you?”

“I am not sure what you are asking, Professor,” he said.

I knew what I was asking, but quite why I was asking it seemed to be harder to work out. Actually, it was not. I wanted to see this boy dressed as a woman. I wanted it so badly that it almost made me physically sick. It was sick after all. The motive had to be sexual, even perverse.

I suggested that we could do it off campus if he liked. I said that I would provide the garments from the wardrobe of a departed girlfriend who might be the same size. That would be a lie. There was not wardrobe. There had been no girlfriend for years.

I knew that I was not a good-looking man, but college professors hold power, so they get their share of propositions. I never took up with any female student, I can say because I am aware that it is wrong and the basis for immediate dismissal, but the fact is that I did not care for anybody who had approached me. Now it appeared that I would put myself at risk not for a female student, but a male one. It was worse than wrong, it was wrong and gay.

“I am not sure about this …”.

“I want you to dress and then rewrite these paragraphs here, and here. It is an experiment. I just want to see how it might change perspective. I want you to see it too. It about the voice of the work. The voice can change. It would be very interesting to see. Forgive me for putting it on you like this. W academics tend to get carried away.” It was all total bullshit, but I just prayed that it would work.

“I suppose I could,” he said. “But yeah, not here. Maybe your place?”

“Great. You can dress there too if you like. Tomorrow night?”

As I put together my papers I watched K J Barnsworth walk out of the lecture hall and I imagined a ponytail hanging down and a skirt bouncing on a bubble butt. With thoughts like that, no wonder I went home and made a serious dent in a bottle of vodka. It seemed like I was going crazy, but I had taken a step towards disaster.

It seemed like I had figured out exactly what size he was. I explained that to the lady in the store when I chose the outfit from the window. Of course I did not say that it was a young man. I said it was a for a niece and that she might needed some undergarments with a bit of padding in them. She knew exactly what was required. She was very helpful.

But as that day wore on I started to realize that this needed to stop. I felt that this would be the end of me. As if “Female student gets A+ grade after sleeping with her professor” sounds bad, what about “Male student forced to cross-dress by depraved professor to get A+ grade”. It was just that I was on a train careering towards a gulch with no bridge over it.

You don’t engage in an academic life without intellect. Intellect is what takes us past impulses into rational thought. Sit down and take a breath. You don’t have to understand where these feelings come from, you just have to understand that they are inappropriate and that you do not have to act upon them. You need to act upon reason.

That afternoon I asked K. J to come down after class. I said that with consideration I decided that I should not oversee the experiment that I was proposing. I gave him a bag with the clothes in it. The clothes and the underwear, stockings and shoes, even some special shampoo, facial depilation cream, and little makeup. It was everything I though that he needed to become her. Maybe it might happen, but I would not be watching. That would be weird.

I did not put it that way. I said that it might be worth trying. I said that I felt that there was something in that summer assignment which needed to be explored. It was as if he had written the whole thing from another perspective – as if he was another person with more joy and imagination.

“This stuff is no use to me,” I said. “Maybe you can use it. Maybe you won’t. Either way you are getting an A+”.

The whole experience drained me somehow. If there was another person within K J Barnsworth I had discovered somebody else inside meas well, and I did not like him. He was nasty, manipulative and degenerate. I decided that now was the time to take a break from teaching, and take the beach house I was offered, and write that novel I had always talked about.

It came slowly. My head was still filled with thoughts about somebody who did not exist – an imaginary woman called K J. She still seemed to appear in my dreams, and it seemed to take a year before she was finally starting to become only a very occasional visitation on me.

It was summer and the local community was starting to fill up. There were people walking the beach where I had once walked alone, and it was getting hard to find a table for one in the small coffee shops and restaurants with a view of the sea.

And then one day she just appeared in front of me.

“Why Professor Livermore, imagine meeting you here!”

I was puzzled for a moment, but only a moment. She was wearing a floral sundress, with a scarf of a similar fabric tying back her should length hair in soft curls. She wore light make up and her eyes sparkled. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“K J!”

“I go by Katy these days,” she said. “As you can see, a lot has changed, and I owe it all to you.”

I just mumbled. It seemed that the Professor had been so long alone with his keyboard that even the man who taught communication with language was at a loss, or was it the sight of her that had struck me dumb?

“You told me that I was not who I thought I was,” she continued. “You saw right through me. You were absolutely right. The moment that I put on that dress that you gave me, and all the other things that you just placed in front of me, I realized that you were right. I did not just need to dress like a woman. I needed to be a woman. Thank you Professor Livermore. Thank you for all that you have done for me.

She stepped over to me and hugged me tightly, pulled my face into her wonderful hair, letting her perfume capture me like a fly in a spider’s web.

“Are you here alone?” I had to ask. I was not her teacher anymore. I had a vision that I might take her to bed. I really did not care what her anatomy might be, although the dress and the pressure of them upon me showed that her breasts were well developed and real.

“No, my boyfriend is trying to organize a boat for us,” she said. “I am just waiting here for him. But I would love to grab a coffee or a shake or something and find out how you are doing. You really were the smartest guy teaching at college. Not just for spotting me, but for all the stuff I learned. I am still doing English but after my surgery my boyfriend wants me to finish my courses over the net.”

I did not want to tell her what I was doing. It was nothing, so I had nothing to say. I saw a strong good looking young man come towards us and I knew that I was nothing compared to him.

He shook my hand. She kissed my cheek. We parted.

I still can’t get her out of my head.

The End

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