The Unsung

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

He was called into the Office of the director himself. It was a total shock to be in the presence of the man himself – J. Edgar Hoover – some might say the second most powerful man in America after the President. Others might say the President is really number 2.

“I am aware that you have an application in to become an agent, young man,” said the director. His huge bug eyes stared at Kevin Mahoney intently, and with an odd trace of interest.

“Yes Sir. I am studying law at night school, Sir. I know that you take only the best.” Kevin could hardly restrain his excitement, but he was puzzled too. Why was he here? What could he be wanted for?

“To be honest Mahoney, you are not really the type that we are looking for in the bureau, but the very things that might give us pause might qualify you for a special job, and if you are willing, might see you join us through the back door, as it were.”

The Director was direct, as was his reputation. Hoover was talking about Kevin’s physical size and slightly effeminate demeanor. It was well known that the director disliked such traits, which he regarded as indicative of homosexuality. He would be right in Kevin’s case, but he could have no evidence as there was none. Only Father Dunn knew of his depraved thoughts, which he was dealing with through prayer and penance.

“Have you heard of Albert Horan, young man? Come to think of it, I would be surprised if you had, but he is a major follower of Father Charles Coughlin, and you will have heard of him?” The Director moved some papers on his desk. It was a file marked “Social Justice Menace”.

“Yes Sir,” said Kevin. “He’s the radio priest. I am a practicing catholic Mr. Hoover, but I can’t say I agree with much of what he talks about.”

“I am glad to hear that, Son,” said Hoover. “Catholicism is a plus for what we have in mind. And you speak German too, as I understand it?”

“My mother is German, Sir. And so my grandmother on my mother’s side was too. I spent a lot of time with both of them talking together in the language of the old country, so I guess I just picked it up.”

“And I have to tell you that I know about your hobby – the amateur dramatic thing,” the Director steepled his fingers and looked at his junior with seeming disapproval.

“Just a hobby, Sir,” Kevin said as if apologizing. He would have liked it to be more. He loved to act, and to sing and dance. He dreamed of a career on Broadway, but he was not stupid. We must all return to reality. “What show, Sir?”

“I don’t recall the name. You were in the chorus I think – in a blazer and straw boater, with painted cheeks, singing falsetto”.

As if on call, Kevin’s cheeks turned just that shade of red. He was mortified.

“Please don’t be embarrassed,” said the Director. “Because there is another question – have you ever dressed as a woman?”

Surely he could not know that? He could not deny his appearances in public, but how could this man - even if it was said that he knew everything he wanted to know - know that? His reply had to be honest.

“Not in public, Sir. Just for theatrical purposes … yes.”

“Excellent!” Kevin was shocked to hear Mr. Hoover say it. “I am sure that you would make a very attractive young woman.” It seemed he knew that too.

“I really want the opportunity to serve, Mr. Hoover,” he said.

“Good,” said Hoover, reaching for the file. “If you will do this then you may well be joining us. I am going to explain what we want to do, and I am doing so in the strictest confidence – do you understand? Nothing leaves this room. Secrecy is everything.”

Kevin nodded.

“Europe is at war,” said the Director. “The nation faces pressure from those who want us to join in the war, and others that want us to stay out. The Bureau needs to look at both, but we are particularly concerned with the role of Germany supporting underground movements trying to keep us out of the war. Father Coughlin is the public face of that movement – he is an anti-semite in the nature of the Nazis and a man who has far too much to say.”

“Should I ask where women’s clothes come into this?” asked Kevin, takin advantage of the silence as Hoover rustled through his papers.

“Good question. You want to get to the point. Good. We need to get inside this movement. It is what we call “an undercover operation”. The target is this man, Albert Horan. Take a look at the photo. Like you, he is Catholic, and he is also a faggot, which may be like you, or it may be not – I am not here to judge. Investigation is what we do. It’s on the door. Anyway, he likes boys that look like girls, or girls who are really boys. I won’t go into it, but he is alone at the moment and maybe he is open to his own twisted idea of romance. We know he is looking for a German speaker who could act as his assistant and translator, so that could be you. And we are thinking that if you applied for the job dressed as a woman, then there is almost zero chance of him not hiring you on the spot.”

Kevin sat through another pause without saying anything. He was imagining what it might be like to step outside in a dress … as an agent of the FBI! How could all his dreams come true at the same time?

“I can see that you are a little taken aback, and maybe I will need to add to that,” said Hoover. “You would be working for the FBI and you would be serving your country. You will be using those acting skills but there is no backstage to jump to if things get difficult. Undercover means on your own. There is danger here. If you agree to this, you need to go into it with your eyes open – aware of the risks. Do you understand?”

“Yes Sir, and I’ll do it, Sir,” said Kevin. “When do I start?”

“Immediately,” said the Director. “I have a name of a small beauty salon nearby. I am going to send you there straight away. You can leave everything behind once you get there. We have already sent in your fake resumé to Horan. You have an interview on Monday. You have the weekend to become accustomed to living as this man-woman.”

Kevin was handed the file that Hoover had been leafing through, together with an address and then shown the door. It all seemed to have happened very quickly, as Kevin was to learn was the manner in which the Director of the FBI managed things. The file contained profiles and photographs of Horan and Cochrane, and a profile for somebody called Declan Leary, otherwise known as Dee, which was the person he was meant to be.

The address was indeed, small beauty shop down an alley close to FBI headquarters.

“Oh yes, we know the Director very well,” said the lady in charge. It seemed so strange that she should say that. It was well known that J. Edgar Hoover was a confirmed bachelor. What need would he have for contact with a business with only female clients?

“I am not sure how to describe my needs,” said Kevin.

“Mr. Hoover has told us what is required,” said the lady. “Have you ever heard of a Brazilian wax? I hope that you are not too shy, because we have been told an all over is essential. How lucky your are to have so much hair, young man. We can work with that, and weave in a switch. Added hair is all the rage these days. Do you know that Veronica’s Lake’s hair is not all hers? You can also use turbans. They come in so many colors and styles. The Bureau are looking after the cost, plus wardrobe and accessories too. You must be absolutely thrilled!”

It was clear to Kevin that she had performed this transformation for some other man, and a man who must have been truly delighted to present as a woman. As he lay down to suffer to receive whatever was coming he wondered how he felt about this. Was it really a thrill to be dressed as a woman? He enjoyed it, but it was not a kick – it was more that he felt comfortable and at ease.

Then he felt the pain of the first swatch of hair being pulled. He almost fainted.

He left the salon over three hours later, with a bag of clothes, tottering out on heels that were not very high, but still challenging. He hailed a cab and whispered his address. He would need to work on his voice, although the lady in the salon had given him some tips.

He had the following day off so that he could work his way through the papers, so he decided to struggle out what he was wearing beneath the dress – a heavy garment that gave him the shape of a woman. He opened the bag he had been given at the salon. There was another dress – something suitable for wearing on the weekend – and a ladies silky night gown. On it was a label – “Be sure to wear this every night”. Kevin recognized the handwriting. It was Mr. Hoovers. There was also a letter at the bottom of the bag, also from Mr. Hoover. It simply read – “Please visit me at my home on Sunday afternoon at 3:00pm fully attired as Miss Dee Leary. The address is below.” And there was the address.

It had been the home of Mr. Hoover’s mother who had died recently, in 1938. J. Edgar Hoover had lived with his mother there from childhood. His family had always lived in Washington DC.

It was a very assured Miss Dee Leary who walked up the stairs to the large front door. The initial swelling of the rigorous depilation had subsided with the use of the soothing creams and the “estro” tablets provided by the lady at the salon. Dee had spent all of Saturday and the earlier part of Sunday exploring what it was like to present as a woman, including window shopping, visiting galleries and being approached by men. Although she had occasionally encountered an odd look, all interactions had given her confidence. Even an amateur actor know that presenting in public in a role is not an act.

There was an old-fashioned doorbell – a handle pulled down to ring a bell inside.

She recognized the man who answered the door. It was Mr. Tolson, the Bureau’s Deputy Director who occupied the office next to Mr. Hoover’s.

“Agent Leary,” said Mr. Tolson. It was the first time ever to be addressed that way and it was pleasing. “Do come inside. You are awaiting in the sitting room.”

Dee checked her dace in the mirror by the door. She had applied her own makeup and tidied her own hair that afternoon, but much of the day before had been consumed by practice. She was satisfied, but she was keeping the Director waiting. She rushed through the door opened by Mr. Tolson.

She was momentarily confused. The only occupant of the room was a woman, wearing a flouncy blouse, skirt below the knee, stockings and heels and a wig of luxuriant dark curls. But Dee quickly realized that it was J. Edgar Hoover himself, in women’s clothing.

“I hope you’re not shocked,” came the voice – it was his and yet not – feminine somehow and not at all affected. “Clyde, would you like to bring in the tea I made for our guest.”

“I’ll do that straight away, Edie” said Mr. Tolson, withdrawing. He had called the Director “Edie” as in short for Edith – not “Ed” for Edgar. Besides, everybody called him “Mr. Hoover”. Everybody.

“I just thought that I might put you at ease by following suit,” said “Edie”. It seemed very unlikely, thought Dee. Here was somebody not dressed this way for the first time, as confirmed when the tea arrived and “she” attended to it with such grace that you could have sworn that it was a woman, albeit not a very attractive one. The hostess said “I just want you to be a success tomorrow. I thought we would meet and chat as two ladies might, and you can tell me about yourself … just to make sure that your story is straight.”

They sat and they talked through the investigation and its purposes, just as if they where two women discussing the latest fashions in clothing or décor. It seems almost surreal, but it was useful. By the time that Dee was ready to leave, she felt fully she, and fully prepared.

Mr. Tolson escorted Dee to the door.

“I would like to call again, if possible, upon …”, said Dee, suddenly realizing that “Mr. Hoover” was not in the building.

“Mrs. Tolson,” said the Deputy Director. “That would be nice. Edith does like visitors, but only a select few. I am sure you understand. She will invite you when she has time.”

Dee had been there so long that it was already getting dark. Dee hurried home, full of confidence.

She arose in the morning in the same frame of mind. She showered and ran a razor over her legs. She dressed in her undergarment and selected a dress to wear – one that she had bought herself on Saturday. The clothes that had been supplied were nice, but she felt that something more reflective of her personality was in order. If Albert Horan was attracted to things feminine, she wanted to be that.

She attended to her hair. It was long enough to draw back under a scarf as a head band in a modern style, and the switch was in place to hint at long locks. She now applied makeup with skill, playing special attention to the eyelashes that she intended to flutter busily.

She took a cab to the Washington Office of The National Union for Social Justice with another name under that – “The Christian Front”. She sat quietly with two other women before the first of those and the then the second, were called in for brief interviews. She looked at the expressions on their faces as they had both exited. Neither looked too happy.

She entered to the room where Albert Horan sat, his head looking at the papers on his desk. Without raising his head he asked – “Do you speak German well?”

“My mother is German, and all of her family, Sir, said Dee. “Perhaps you have heard the phrase in German – *muttersprache* – mother tongue. English is my language, but German is my *muttersprache*.”

He looked up with a smile, and Dee could see the look in his eye as Al Horan looked her over – breasts, legs, face, hair. He seemed to approve. The other two women looked drab by comparison.

“Where do you stand on America’s involvement in the war in Europe?” he said.

“On my father’s side I am Irish, like you, I suspect,” said Dee. “We owe the English no favors. And then I have family in Germany. But I am American. And as you can see, I won’t be going to any war – I think I have made sure of that.” Dee came forward and took the chair he was pointing to, crossing her legs and arranging her skirt daintily.

Dee wondered if he could guess that he was not a woman. It seemed that nobody else had in the three days he had been pretending to be one. She had a plan, but it needed something from him.

“You can type?” Horan asked.

“I can, and I am improving,” said Dee, honestly.

“Can I ask, are you a practicing Catholic?”

“I have been practicing that all my life,” said Dee. “But I can’t say that practice makes me the perfect Catholic.” It seemed an amusing thing to say. He looked serious. She wanted to lighten things up. It was not meant to be suggestive of sin, but it seemed that Albert Horan might have assumed that it was.

“None of us are. It is the human condition. But the church has the power to grant indulgences.” He still seemed to be serious, but then he grinned and added – “We are so lucky to be Catholic.”

It was what she wanted – the excuse to laugh. She had practiced it, much better than she practiced her faith. It was the revealing laugh. Loud, and very masculine. It was nothing like the feminine voice that she used to speak.

She could see his shock extinguish the smile, but then it came back, slowly and with the hint of lascivious evil.

“I think that you have a secret, Miss Leary,” he said. “But it is safe with me.”

“Please consider hiring me, Mr. Horan,” she said earnestly. “If you do hire me as I am and keep my secret, I will work hard for you.”

She could sense his sexuality. It came as no surprise that he hired her on the spot, and that he wanted her to start that very day. He showed her to the desk outside his office, and presented her with some material to read through. It was mostly transcripts of the radio speeches of Father Charles Coughlin, with the most recent of those railing against The Jewish plan for world domination” pushed by “modern Shylocks”. He had been quoting Nazi propagandist Joeseph Goebbels and had stated his opposition to America entering the war in Europe with the words – “Must the entire world go to war for 600,000 Jews in Germany who are neither American nor French nor English citizens but citizens of Germany?”

Later in the day Horan appeared at her desk to ask about her availability for an evening engagement that very night.

“That would be on the basis that you understand what we are all about having read all this,” said Horan. He wanted to check her loyalty first.

“I hate Communism and its attacks on individuality,” said Dee. “And I think father Horan is right about unrestrained capitalism being heartless and cruel. And as for the war, could you imagine me being sent of in uniform, Mr. Horan. What chance would I have?’ She pushed out her lower lip. It had the desired effect.

“People like you are very special,” said Horan. “If only there were more like you. Can I just assure you that you secret is safe, and you are also assured of my personal protection.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Horan,” Dee simpered deliberately.

“We have to meet somebody outside the office,” said Horan. “He speaks English well, but I just need you with me in case there is any confusion. I will buy you dinner. Are you ready now?”

“I will just get my go and visit the powder room,” said Dee, which she did.

The place outside the office was a small Italian restaurant nearby. Dee noted that there was a picture of Mussolini on the wall – a ridiculous looking man in one of his chest forward poses. There was a table at the back with a view of the restaurant yet enclosed enough to ensure a conversation could not be heard.

“This is Eric,” said Horan, and the stranger rose from his chair with stiff but well-drilled German courtesy. He took Dee’s hand and snapped his heels. “My secretary, Miss Leary. She speaks German,” said Horan.

There was a brief exchange in that language between Dee and Eric (no surname offered or given) which impressed both the German and Horan, who did not understand one word of it.

She took notes in handwriting because she thought she should, even through the meal that had been ordered. There was much talk about the hatred of communism and the fact that both Germany and the United States were vehemently opposed to it, despite the fact that at that time Hitler had a pact with Communist Russia that had split Poland between them. But the principle vitriol was reserved for the Jewish people. Dee betrayed no emotion as she scribbled down notes. She had to tell herself that she was there only for information, and her views needed to be another secret.

It was late when Eric took his leave. Dee was relieved it was over.

“I live in an apartment nearby,” said Horan. “Why don’t you come to my place for a nightcap?”

“Perhaps another night, Mr. Horan?” said Dee. “It was my first day and it has been a long one. I am exhausted. I will order a cab.”

He looked more than disappointed – maybe even a little angry, but what she said seemed right, so he nodded and said – “Let me ask the manager to call you a taxi. Next week we will need to meet another person – Eric is from the German-American Bund, but next week we have a meeting with somebody from the Free Society of Teutonia, and the week after that from the Crusaders for Americanism. These are all groups who share our views.”

She felt that within a day she had achieved huge advances. Even though it was late when she got home, she called the number she had been given and was put through to Director, possibly at his home.

“This sounds very good,” said Mr. Hoover. Dee pictured him sitting in his sitting room in a wing and peignoir. “Did he fall for you when he realized you were a man dressed as a woman? That is exactly what I expected, but to everybody else you need to appear undeniably female so as not to draw attention. I suggest that you wear a nightie to bed and adopt a skin care program. There is nothing like going to sleep as a woman … to allow you to fit into the role.”

There was something about the way that the Director spoke about this that seemed to confirm Dee’s suspicion’s – the Director of the FBI, the fearsome J. Edgar Hoover, the man who vilified homosexuals, was a secret cross-dresser!

It made Dee wonder how Hoover was able to function like this – to step so easily out of this role. As she looked at herself in the mirror and unpinned the switch from her hair and cleaned off the makeup to apply her night cream, she felt that it might take weeks if not months to cease to be Dee now that she was so entrenched in his soul.

She put on the nightgown that had been supplied. It seems a little old-fashioned. Dee would prefer something nicer but it would never be seen by anybody other than Dee, so it was hardly justified. Still, she would go to the Department store in her lunch hour.

She did that and bought other items too, keeping the receipts to recover the costs from the Bureau. It seemed essential that she continue to foster the attention of Albert Horan, while at the same time avoiding his physical overtures. At that second visit to the same restaurant she rose with the guess and referred to a headache, and at the meeting withing two Crusaders for Americanism she was trying to do the same, when Horan reached out and sat her back down.

He mouthed the word “stay”. There was no plea to it. But it seemed that she had no choice. She knew what Horan wanted. How was she going to deal with this?

The strange thing was that she almost wanted to have a man place his hands on her smooth naked body. It was the only thing missing. Dressing as a woman, living as a woman, even feeling like a woman, just seemed like pretending. To have somebody make love to you as a woman would surely mean the end of manhood – what would that be like?

But not Albert Horan. They were alone now, and it seemed as if his hands had grown in size and become like the claws of a ghoul, ready to handle her in some revolting fashion.

“Is that you Deck … I’m sorry, you go by Dee these days -right?” A stranger was standing over them, tall and handsome, lean but broad shouldered with hair parted neatly and a well-trimmed moustache. “It’s me, Chris, that old friend of your sister’s. I haven’t seen you for ages. You look gorgeous.” He turned to Horan to add – “Do you mind if I …?”

“Well, actually …”.

“Chris, of course!” said Dee. “Of course, please do sit down.” Here was a rescuer. Doubtless he had been sent by the Bureau, and had been watching Dee from a distance. He had seen Horan moving in and he was here to cut in.

“Actually, your sister gave me something to give to you. I was going to drop it off but I can save myself a cab ride. I am staying at the hotel across the street. Why don’t you come on over and grab it, if you like it. We could do it now if you’re finished?”

“We have plans,” said Horan. “I’ll pay the bill and we can go across. I’ll wait in the lobby.”

“Fine,” said Chris. “Like I said, Dee, this look is fabulous!” He winked at her when Horan’s back was turned.

The walked across the street. Horan looked very annoyed, but sat in the lobby as they got into the elevator.

“You arrived just in the nick of time,” said Dee. “Did Mr. Hoover send you?”

“Actually I am British Military Intelligence Division 5,” said Chris. His voice had changed from the unplaceable but familiar accent to the clipped tones of a British gentleman. “Allow me to introduce myself properly – I am Crispin Smuts-Martin, presently serving as the Assistant Cultural Attache at the British Embassy, but looking into pro-German or anti-British groups here, starting with those under investigation by the FBI.”

“But you clearly know all about me, how is that possible?”

“I’m afraid I can’t disclose that, my dear,” he said, holding the elevator door open for her and pointing at the door to his room. “In fact, I would not have even disclosed my presence had I not sensed your distress. It seems that as a gentleman spy, I am more of a gentleman than a spy.” He opened the door and allowed her to enter his room.

“But Horan is waiting downstairs,” she said.

“I wonder how long for,” said Chris. “Would you like a drink. I do love the way America hotels have these little bottles of liquor for moments like this. Just make yourself comfortable – on the bed if you like. Would you mind if I removed my tie?”

Dee nodded. The bed seemed like a good idea. She wanted to life her feet. Her shoes looked great but after a long day they were pinching.

“Since you know all about me then I am guessing that you will not be taking advantage,” she said.

“Ah … about that,” said Chris. “Of course, I am a gentleman and I would never take advantage of a woman, and it seems to me that is what you are. As for the … the extra materiel, as we might call it, well forgive me if I find that fascinating. I must also admit that I am not totally unfamiliar with ladies like yourself. I have been watching your employer also, over the time I have been stationed in Washington. Nor is this unheard of in Britain. Like I say, fascinating.”

She recognized the look. It was desire. In only a few weeks living as Dee she had seen it many times and from many faces. There was something very satisfying in being looked at like that, so long as it was not Albert Horan.

“Yes, I will have a drink,” she said. “But that Horan is very keen on me.”

“I am not surprised,” said Chris. “But we can wait him out, even if it takes all night.”

They did. Or at least Horan was not there in in the morning when they walked out, arm in arm, and with the flush of afterglow still on their faces.

The End

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Erin’s seed: “It's 1940 and there are semi-underground movements in America to keep us from going to war with Germany, many of them are funded by the Nazis. One of the homegrown fascist leaders has a presumed weakness - he is fascinated by crossdressers. The FBI hires an actor to go undercover and try to lure him into an indiscretion that will destroy his credibility or at least gather useful intelligence. Our hero falls in love with someone, perhaps her handler or another secret agent perhaps sent by the Brits.”