The Editor

A Very Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

It was my fourth Marion Potter book and at the end I found my eyes full of tears. It was unusual for me because while I can be as emotional as the next man, I was editing. I was looking for spelling and grammar and inconsistencies. When you are doing that, it is usually hard to get caught up in the story. It should be just words. But they were words that I did not realize had caught me in their web and were now winding me up in silk.

That was what it was like. I wiped my eyes and my nose. Silk is so soft and beautiful, but a spider spins it to wrap prey and then suck its guts out. The target of this kind of romantic fiction is supposed to be the lonely female dreaming of the perfect man, not a man like me who has never come close to the perfect woman.

I think that the publisher gave me this stint for just that reason. She said: “Her stuff is great. You know the stuff – a woman waits for the perfect man, and then one day…”. She said that these stories moved even the coldest hearts. “Even I have to put the book down to get my thoughts back in order. You should be able to cast a discompassionate eye over it. I see from her contract that she lives in the same street as you do, but she only deals by email. Just send the finished copy to her and to me.”

I just shrugged, but she was right. There was a depth of feeling in every sentence that I could not quite analyze. In my business you should know all the devices. Some combinations of words create images and some just touch some ancient memory and trigger emotion. But these words were different. It was like they were talking to me.

It struck me that this Marion Potter must be a woman with a huge experience of life and of love. For all I knew she could be 80 years old and crippled, but she must have been a great beauty in her youth, and a wild lover. And yet, her words and phrasing seemed youthful – even younger than mine. Perhaps in youth she had just managed to cram in as much lovemaking as a woman could stand?

It made me smile. Even though I had at least two and possibly a dozen conflicting views of her in my minds eye, I wondered if I might be falling in love with one of them, or possibly all of them. Imagine that? She may be married, or have a boyfriend, or probably both. She would have plenty of female fans but probably men too – she would be fighting them off with a stick.

I just felt that I had to say something to her. It would just be a compliment. Something to give her encouragement that as a literary goddess she certainly did not need. I sent her a message: “It is not supposed to happen to editors, but this book moved me. Great work.”

I expected something back. I checked the time. It was late afternoon. I knew that she was on her PC at this time normally.

Then there was a message. It was just a jumble of letters, but when I looked at them and I looked at my keyboard, I saw that they seemed to trail from top left to bottom right. Was that it or was it something more visceral that may me jump up and check through the dossier on her for the address?

It was only a dozen houses up the street, but I never had to drive up there. It was a pretty house, but not large. Even on the outside it appeared feminine and maybe almost fairytale. I could imagine a woman skipping out in a patterned flared skirt, perhaps with an apple pie in her hand held above her shoulder.

I knocked. I was still a little concerned despite my curious desire-driven daydreams. There was no answer, so I went to the window and looked inside. It seemed very tidy and light. It struck me as the home of a woman living alone. That pleased me somehow. I squinted for a better view, and I was horrified to see a desk in the corner of the living room with a woman slumped over a PC.

I went to try the front door, but it was locked. So, I ran around the back. That was unlocked. I walked in. I called out: “Miss Potter?! Marion?! It’s Lyall – your editor.”

I walked into the living room and over to the desk. I could see a jar of pills open and almost empty. The pills were orange and on the mouse pad I could see a pool of orange phlegm and what looked like a few regurgitated pills. Marion Potter groaned. It was a surprisingly deep groan. She was not dead. Not yet.

I felt that I need to get up and restore her to consciousness before I called for an ambulance. Did that idea come from the movies? It seemed a sensible thing to do. Get her on her feet. Get her moving. Maybe get her to the kitchen and induce vomiting. I know that timing is everything in an emergency, and I also knew that an ambulance would take ages to get here.

I reached down to help her to her feet. I took her under her arms. They were heavy and she was heavy. Her blond curled hair smelled as if she had just stepped out of a salon. I noticed that her makeup looked fresh too, with false eyelashes. Who would go to this effort and then try to kill themselves?

In my arms I realized that she was quite beautiful in a striking way. As I said, I had multiple images of Marion Potter in my mind but they were all of a much smaller and slighter woman. But I was not disappointed. I had a thought about sitting opposite her at a table in an expensive restaurant. We could do that – share a meal – but first I needed to get what was in her stomach out.

As it turns out this is not what is advised, but it seemed clear that my struggling to walk her across the room was having some effect. She was recovering consciousness. She was still groaning deeply.

“Miss Potter?” I had her in the kitchen and pinned against the bench to support her. He was wearing a colorful dress low enough in the front to show off wonderful breasts, and short enough in the hem to show equally wonderful legs. “Miss Potter? Marion?”

She heard her name. Her eyes opened and her head shook. She simply said “Oh!” It was not the growl but a delightful feminine voice.

“I’m Lyall, your editor,” I said. “We were corresponding this morning about your book. I actually live nearby so I thought I would call in. But it seems that you have had an accident.”

“I don’t feel well,” she said. Her eyes seemed to want to close. I shook her gently.

“Let me make you coffee. I can see the machine.”

“I can do it,” she said. “Coffee is a good idea.”

“Unless you want me to call you an ambulance? Maybe that would be better?”

“I’d rather not getting anyone else involved … Lyall,” she said.

I have to say that her using my name had some strange effect on me, as if I had been blessed by the Pope, if that could have meant anything, I seemed light headed as if the blood had rushed away. But I understood her reluctance. Still, I must have looked concerned, so to reassure me, she smiled. That made something else happen – the very opposite – not my head and not blood leaving, but my lloins and blood arriving.

She made her way to the coffee machine holding the bench for support. I could now see that she was wearing heels and stockings. She had been sitting at home typing but dressed as if attending a party, and she had tried to kill herself.

“You work is a gift to so many,” I said to her. “Please don’t try to end your life.” I had said it because it needed to be said. She was getting down a bag of coffee, but the words stopped her … only for a moment. Her hands moved efficiently over her task.

“You don’t know anything about my problems,” she said without turning. But when she did I could see tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I know that you are just trying to help.”

I was trying to help and I knew exactly what I had to do. I had always thought myself awkward in a situation like this, but I I strode over to put my arms around her I never doubted that it was not right.

I felt her yield to my embrace. It is a special thing for a man to feel that. It was as if my touch removed all threats, and that I had the absolute power to protect from any harm. I wanted to be that person, because it seemed to me that she thought I must be.

I was like the man in the last chapter of her books. She had been missing all her life, even before she knew me. And now I was here and she was in my arms. I suddenly realized that there was a lump in my pants and that it was touching her! Would she be threatened by it.

I pulled away to check. Her eyes were wide and wet with tears. It seemed that no pair of eyes could be more beautiful. She kissed me, I think. Or I may have kissed her. Whoever was first nobody want to be the first to disengage. It was pure passion – bodies gaining heat and sensitivity to the slightest thing.

But it was her who pulled away.

“We can’t do this,” she said. “You could never want me like this. I know that I have excited you, but that is wrong. I am fiction, just like my stories.”

“You are as real as gravity,” I said, a momentary flicker of wisdom.

“Then let me let you down slowly,” she said. “I wanted to go out looking beautiful. I wanted to die as a woman. I wanted the first person to find my body to think me beautiful, because on the pathologists slab my true ugliness would be exposed.”

“What are you talking about,” I said. “I think that you are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“But I am not a woman,” she said.

It took a crazy amount of time for me to work this out. Was this some use of words that even and editor like I was could not grasp? Was it some game she was playing? It seemed as if the furthest thought from my mind was that this was a man in women’s clothing. The hair was real. The breasts were real. She was real. And you those low groans were male. Those striking features not classically feminine.

“But you are very close to one?” I said. It seems some desperate attempt to find a plank in a shipwreck.

“I have been living as a woman ever since the first book came out,” she said. “I could leave my job. I could write and live as Marion Potter. But what about love? I could only dream of it – imagine it. Everybody needs love. I mean real love that can be given physical expression. Nobody wants a woman like me, or rather nobody I would want, wants a woman like me.”

I decided to take a leap. In fact it was hardly a decision. Somethings you know in your soul – you just know them.

“I do,” I said. It would not be the last time I said those words to her, but that part of the story has not yet been edited.

The End

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