The Ocean of the Soul

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I had what I called “unnatural thought” from an early age, but I buried them as deep as I could. There are men who have lust for other men, but it was not like that.

I was drawn strongly by two things, the sea and things feminine. Some say that the sea is a woman – changeable and unpredictable, sometimes cruel. But men can be all of those things, and it seems to me that only a male sea would draw you into the battle of a storm and then torment you by taking all the wind away. The sea is salt, and strength, and the threat of danger. To me, it is male, and it makes of men playthings.

I love the sea as a woman loves a man. It is a love born of dependence and a little fear of his angry moods, but a love for the majority of the time, running before the wind so that it is but a gentle and comforting breeze.

I was born in the large seaside town of Gotenhafen near Danzig in West Prussia at the height of the age of sail, and it was the sails of those large ships that beckoned me. I would spend time on the point by the lighthouse to watch the men at work trimming for the roadstead, or at the docks to hear them secure or stow the running rigging and memorize the names and commands. I even sailed in small boats within the harbor and a little further out. But I kept to my books at the church school. I learned well so I could see myself fit for command, but I started fairly close to the bottom, as we all had to in those days.

I signed on with a small ship carrying timber from Sweden and Finland to England. It was an English ship and for all my time at sea I would speak and write only in the English language, although my native tongue was German. I signed on as “a monkey” who would wash the decks and lug buckets up from the stinking bilges and run up the rigging as ordered.

But I was also born big and strong and grew to some size in my apprenticeship “before the mast”. I could climb quickly and take in more sail than two small men, and on the windlass I was supreme. I was too big for the bilges and did my time at the helm, in particular in wild weather when a simple rope and block steering flat called for muscle. That put me at the con, and with those in command.

So I started with the Baltic trade and learned to navigate passages, and then to the Atlantic routes and the wide ocean. By the time of my first voyage to India I was already a bosun, and upon my first crossing of the Pacific I was first mate.

My first job as captain was aboard a clipper ship out of Boston, taking teas and other items from China, or wool from Australia and running the roaring forties across the South of the Pacific then North to Europe or the East Coast of the Americas. These were long voyages, but that is the way I liked them. I felt unsteady on land, as if a rolling deck was my gravity. It seemed that only drunkenness could restore the roll that I craved.

At sea I was at home. I developed a reputation as a good captain. I kept my schedules and delivered my cargo intact, and I ran a good crew. People would say that Big John Konitz was one of the best.

Sailors are notoriously rough men, and I could be one of them. On a boat at sea the skipper is all but God himself, and my fists were His lightning bolts. But yet I learned that my size was best used with a soft voice. I made sure that I always had a mate with a loud voice to shout into the tops in a gale. I would whisper and shout.

There was a softness in me that I could never allow my men to see, or any man for that matter.

I used to tell myself that my attraction to things feminine was my love of women, but I was lying. I enjoyed sex as sailors of my time did, with a woman draped over the rail or a table. I would go to the task with vigor and speed, a bare minimum of to be time spent on things umprofitable – or the reverse of that. But after the act was done I would lie or sit for the time allowed and admire her hair or her lace garments with eyes and fingers. It was a longing. If the whore was happy in that moments, then I wanted to feel what she did – a woman’s happiness.

It seemed to me that a man’s life was full of demands. My life was. The vessel owner, the cargo owner, my crew, the harbor master – they all required me to excel, every day. I longed for another life, but that life was impossible.

I thought that marriage might help. I married a woman in San Francisco. I tried to give her the life that I wanted. She died in childbirth. It was not uncommon in those days. I missed her death by days. I was sad for her and for the baby.

We had yet to secure a proper home. She had only some beautiful things that I had bought her. I put them in a second chest and took it aboard my ship. It was my female chest.

I know that there are men who don women’s clothing and some parade in public as if they were women. I did neither. But in quiet moments I would open the chest and dream.

To ensure that I would not act upon my unnatural thoughts, I had grown a thick beard from an early age. I wore my hair long for the time, but with the beard it gave me a look like Samson of the Bible. Some would refer to me by that name, but more as simply “Big John”.

It seemed to me that I was happy. I had the sea under me. I was good at my job and I was admired by many. Those who did not care for me I could lay out cold with a single punch, if I chose. But instead I would engage with people and listen to their stories, rather than tell my own, of which there are many.

It was a life of adventure. Every young boy dreams of such a life. But it was not fulfilling. It was as if I never was that every young boy.

Then one day I went with some of my crew to a whorehouse in Siam. I was told that there the girls are small and pretty as if fresh maidens but all well versed in the means of pleasuring a man. It was there for the first time that I spent an evening with what they call there “a Cat-oo-ee”.

Of course no man sails into a thousand ports with knowing of such people, but this was a new experience. We had sex and “she” showed me all positions that were possible for a girl with no quinny. But we also talked, and I decided to speak of my feelings.

She offered to have sex with me again and be the man if I wanted to be the woman, but the idea seemed so ridiculous that I declined. But I did ask her about how she was able to enjoy sex as a woman and how she prepared her body. She spoke good English and as I had paid for more time than my efforts had taken. She was happy to talk.

I asked her also, about her body and the feminine shape, including small female breasts growing from her chest. She explained that people of her kind were not uncommon in Siam and that there were potions and treatments that could make a male body appear female. She mentioned some plants that grew locally, and the urine of a water buffalo collected during one special week of its pregnancy. I was curious. She said that this price was high, but when she told me it seemed but a trifle.

I returned the next day to collect a large bottle of the concoction and a bamboo pot of the lotion. I stored them in my other chest. It seemed to me that it belonged there. The chest was like a temple for all things feminine and these Siamese drugs were the very essence of the female form contained by artifice.

The chest was a holy place where it seemed that I could bury my unnatural thoughts and step out onto the deck of my ship as the big man in charge.

It was on that same voyage that I mentioned my encounter with the she-man to the bosun. He remarked that there were many of these kinds of women (as he did use that word) in the tropical South Sea Islands. The difference was that these were not small Asian women, but very large brown women. The Polynesians are the largest people of all.

I had visited the port of Suva more than once and some other ports briefly, but these were not stops for a vessel such as mine. The stops were only enroute to Australia or New Zealand of the Great Southern Ocean where no vessel could sail faster. The bosun had worked on smaller boats in coastal trading.

I determined that I should visit. I would need to fabricate a reason.

I had always operated on the principle that my ship should take the fastest route. In a windjammer that is not always a straight line, but it is a true one. As navigators under sail we must know the weather patterns of huge oceans, and know where the wind will be and from what quarter in every season and condition. We can be wrong in our choice of route, but we are never dishonest.

It was just that I was driven by some desire. To be told that there was a place for people like me seemed unbelievable. I had to see it with my own eyes. I arranged to sail by the Island of Upolu in the Samoan Islands and I advised the crew that I would need to stop to effect repairs on navigational equipment.

The port of Apia was small, and I had to anchor off. Just south of the port the Scottish novelist Robert Louis Stevenson had taken up residence. But since he had died in 1894 much had happened in this quiet tropical paradise that he had loved. The Samoan Islands had become a battleground for a clash of the great powers captained in very distant places – Britain, The United States and Germany all wanted to control tiny Samoa. They had all sent steam-powered but fully masted warships to do battle but a storm had wreck all three, and their wrecks remained for me to see.

Viewing these steel vessels reminded me that the days of sail were drawing to a close, and I was ready to seek a new future. But could it really be the future I craved?

I asked some of the local people whether there were men who lived as women in this place, and the reply was yes. They are called fa’afafine which means “In the manner of a woman”. She took me to a place where there were three of them working, but I was immediately drawn to the one they called Nuanua which means rainbow.

Nuanua was as big as I was. She spoke no English, but she did not need to. I could see that she was loved and that she was loving. I could see that she was beautiful, and that many of the local men found her attractive and were ready to sleep with her. But most of all, I saw that she was happy. It was possible for a man to live happily as a woman.

This was the revelation that I had hoped for. I could live in this place. I could make it my home and be a woman here.

I made some friends in Apia. There were some business opportunities and I had money to invest and some commercial skills. But I told them that when I returned it would not be to live in this place as Johan Konitz, but as Johanna.

I finished that voyage, and then took a voyage as an officer only to work passage to Australia before I took a coastal vessel back to Samoa. I landed with money and tradeable items of value, and with my second chest – my essence of things feminine. My wife’s clothes could be used to dress others. I began to take the Siamese drug and to apply the lotion to my chest and groin.

I stayed with the fa’afafine group including Nuanua. This group cared for the old people and visited all the local villages to offer them care. I learned that this was their role and always had been. Fa-afafine were respected as care givers not looked down on as sexual perverts.

They pulled every hair from my face, and from my body and treated my skin with coconut oil to repair the damage caused by the sun and salty airs over my many years at sea.

I was not hopeful, so I was surprised by what followed. My skin did respond, but by what appeared to my new companions to be a miracle – I began to grow breasts. Some had something resembling those, but nothing like I was able to produce.

Other who had more feminine form referred to their having undergone a form of emasculation which I will not describe here in detail. Suffice to say that when asked oof me it required that I make a decision from which there was no turning back. Such decisions I had made many times in my life, but none was easier that this time. Even if I could never be a true woman, I was ready never to be a man anymore.

They made dresses for me from the fabric that I had brought with me, and I wore only feminine attire from that time until now. My hair grew long and was usually worn up as is common for all women in Samoa, and let down to allure the men. The difference was that my hair was fair and fine, and the others loved to arrange it for me.

I was never an ugly man, so as my skin softened, I think that I became a quite good-looking woman. Others said so, but the one whose opinion counted was a man called Amosa. He was a very large local man, so big that many local girls feared lying beneath him, but he was drawn to me.

In all my life I would say that I was never attracted to men, but that may not be entirely true. It is perhaps better to say that I could never be attracted while I was a man, but now that I was a woman his attentions but my heart into a flutter.

I had learned from the she-man in Siam all about how I could be a woman in bed, and with the help of coconut oil and frangipani flowers, after only one or two uncomfortable engagements, Amosa gave me nothing but pleasure. I moved in with him and we lived as man and wife.

It was as if all my dreams had come true. I was a woman with a husband and everybody around me and what I did for the community. Plus I had spent the money I had made in setting up businesses and ensuring that they were run properly. I would not take command myself because I put my husband first.

But the advantage that I had was language. I had learned Samoan and because of the British missionaries English was the spoken language, but the trade in copra and cocoa and other items was with German companies, and I spoke German. It was the German claim to sovereignty over Samoa that had sparked “The Samoan Crisis” and “The First Samoan Civil War” before I had arrived. And it was not over.

The British and Americans allied themselves to a powerful local Prince Tanu, and promised him power if he could rise up against German interests in the city backed by Chief Mata’afa Iosefo. American and British warships shelled the town on 15 March 1899, but when forces were landed they were soundly defeated.

All of this took place as I tried to stay above it all. I was German by birth but I had called the United States my home (if I could call anything not floating to be that) and my nationality perhaps Britain and its commonwealth. But I learned that if one man could mediate, one woman could not.

I had to watch as the distant powers signed a deal without any consultation with the locals including their own allies. The Tripartite Convention gave control of the Eastern Islands to the United States and the Western Islands including Upolu to Germany in exchange for the British taking German territories elsewhere.

My new home had become German, and I was told that I was back in the land of my birth.

But this turned out well for me. My businesses flourished. I was known as a German woman who had married a local man and spoke the local language. It was known that I had invested in local businesses and could be relied on for advice on both commerce and culture.

I would like to think that nobody ever guessed that I was less than a woman, but the truth may be that I had earned such respect that nobody would ever question it. I know that when people asked behind my back some locals would simply say that she came to Samoa in search of a husband who was bigger than she – which is actually true.

Amosa was a good husband to me, and a good father. We adopted two half caste children – both of German fathers who had made local girls pregnant. The oldest of these we named Francis but he was known by everybody as Fritz. He now captains an ocean steamer running the Antipodean Route. Our daughter Miriam married a wealthy American trader.

I had taken her with me on some travels to “civilized” cities, but I preferred that they not be too far from my beloved husband and our home on the shores of the lagoon under the palm trees. The cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Auckland were nearby and I had occasion to go there on business. It gave us the opportunity to wear the clothes in vogue and with our hair styled appropriately. While I was much larger than most of the men I would greet, I had learned so well how to be graceful and demure, and how to place my soft hand to a man’s grasp that I would hear some say - “that it a very large woman” but it was always that I was indeed “a woman”. It certainly helped that I could introduce my daughter whom by good luck, shared some of my features.

But while Miriam looked beyond our island I always looked forward to returning home. Every time that I was back at sea, now more often under the stinking soot of a steam vessels rather than beneath the billowing white sails that I used to love, I was left thinking that the ocean no longer had the pull on my soul that it once had. Now my gravity was my home, and my man, and strongest of all - my life as a woman.

The End

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*Erin’s seed: A boy grows up to be a man knowing he should have been a woman but he's a big guy in a very masculine occupation and he's successful, almost despite himself - he can have the women he wants and eventually marries one. Then he meets a woman with a difference…*