Archaeology

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Archaeologists can be an eccentric bunch. It is a tough row to hoe to dig in the dirt in the blazing sun, even though we generally take our leave in the hottest months – a chance to report back to the institutions that fund our efforts. People have to be more than curious – they have to be driven. Some might call us fixated – my ex-wife would be one of those.

I leapt at the chance to go back to Iraq where I had first been as a student before the Iraq war.

“If you go, don’t come back – or don’t come back to me anyway!” That is what she said, but I was halfway out the door.

In 2017 the Government in Baghdad announced that Islamic State had been defeated and that foreign researchers could come back and carry on the work that was stopped suddenly by the Iraq war in 2003. That means almost 15 years with no excavations, and worse than that, in the Northern Areas the Muslim zealot has sought to destroy many ancient structures, and had succeeded in places. They talked about destroying artefacts too, but as it turned out they sold them as trinkets alongside parcels of heroin, to fund their war against science.

Some had come back earlier and one of those Dr. Evelyn Traynor, an Englishman who was funded by some foundation but reported back to The Department of Assyriology and Mesopotamian Archaeology at Cambridge University. I never even knew that there was a science of Assyriology!

In case you are wondering, Ev was a man, like Evelyn Waugh, the novelist. I say Ev was a man, when we first met.

Before 2003 there had been significant discoveries in Northern Iraq – the so-called “hidden cities” and even while the war raged there were studies being made using remote sensing as a part of a programme co-ordinated by the Smithsonian and involving my University. I was one of the people chomping at the bit to get back on the ground, and get under it.

Ev Traynor was already on the job and had been working on a temple that he mapped from satellite images and had already revealed the wall behind what he described as the altar. When I arrived it was just a case of shifting sand and compressed dust, and revealing wall painting and reliefs, including some script. It was all very exciting.

It was just us working on the wall. We had workers and a small excavator and operator, but Ev was keen to ensure that the site was not disturbed by scores of workers falling over one another. Artefacts are too easily lost in the sheer volume of workers, even disregarding dishonesty.

“I am starting to get a better picture of what is going on here,” said Ev as we were going over tracings one evening. “It is clear that the priestess that is depicted here and referred to in the writings, is not a woman at all. I posit that this is a eunuch. Quite possibly a man who has mutilated his own genitals to be able to honor the goddess.”

“There’s a horrible thought,” I said. I remember that he was examining an image of the frieze with a large magnifying glass. It was an old-fashioned tool but still the best way to check the work on site. Photographs had been taken and could be blown up when they got back, but somehow there is nothing like discoveries in the field. It is as if the atmosphere of ancient places plays a role. It sometimes seems as if the voices of the past survive in these places and whisper their secrets, even to scientists who can never believe in such notions.

T must have been about two months into the dig. The temple was on the edge of the site, and there were different teams across other locations within the cordoned area. We would compare note weekly, or bring mag=jor discoveries to the project table, but otherwise Ev and I did our own thing.

We had already concluded that this was most likely a temple to Inanna, the earliest form of the goddess associated with love, beauty and sex but also of wisdom, power and war. This same goddess was worshipped by later Babylonians as Ishtar. The temple raised in her honor in the ancient city of Uruk was well known to both of us, but this was much earlier in time.

We knew a lot about Ishtar from writings in cuneiform script. It was known that the goddess had a female attendant, the goddess Ninshubur, who might well be one and the same as the male angel Ilabrat. Scholars remained undecided on the point – some might even call the matter contentious. What was not in dispute was that the goddess she (or he) served was the most important Sumerian deity. The myths spoke of Inanna being the source of all knowledge, and her attendant brought knowledge to humanity.

“This could be her return from death,” said Ev. “The myth speaks of two sexless beings being sent to rescue her. This could be them here – naked and without genitals. But yes, this must be Ninshubur, pleading the seven judges of the underworld to release her.”

Dr. Evelyn Traynor was one of those English scholars who seemed educated to a ridiculous extent, with knowledge of several ancient languages and scripts, and able to recite verses from works on myth almost word for word.

“With a female attendant and sexless servants, it would seem that no man could approach the goddess and remember that she was the victim of a rape, according to legend,” said Ev.

I have to say that while we were around the same age, I had to admired my colleague for knowledge and intellect, although sometimes his intensity was a little disconcerting. An important part of archaeology is being able to develop a vision of how you think a civilization might appear – something to be tested by new finds. It was still science – build a model by all means but open it to debate.

“There is a force in places like this,” said Ev. “Can you feel it? It is almost as if the old gods still live here.”

“I know what you mean,” I said Tom, but the truth is that I didn’t. I am a scientist. The way you feel aout a place has no role in understanding it – it may even be a distraction.

“She is the source of wisdom, and yet I feel we are being denied that”, Ev continued. “We should know more. We are in her presence but in being men we are insulting her.”

I have to say that this was the first time that I looked at Ev and understood that something strange was going on. He started looking up to the sky on one of those clear desert nights when the stars look close enough to pluck, as if expecting the goddess to speak to him.

“It has been a long hot day – perhaps we should call it quits and head back to the hotel?” I suggested.

“I feel the answers to our questions are very close,” said Ev, still looking up. “But you are right. We need to break.”

I suppose at that time, that was enough to put it aside, but looking back, that was when it started. Since then I have wondered about natural causes. I had seen my share of sunstroke. While Iraq was closed I had worked in the deserts of Egypt and Tunisia It is usually just exhaustion but can be preluded with a period of muddlement or delirium, but that did not appear the case here.

In the morning I found Ev on his knees in front of that wall, with his head bowed and his hands clasped between his knees, as if in prayer. I had always understood his colleague to be an atheist. Faith had no place in archeology or in any science. Science is conclusions born of evidence and faith is the opposite of that – conclusions based on belief without evidence.

“I haven’t caught you in prayer have I Ev?” I did not mean to say it with a sneer.

“I am surprised that you don’t feel it,” he said. “You might laugh, but there is a force at work here. You don’t mean to say that you have never felt the presence of times past in places you have visited?”

“No,” was my trite reply, but it was probably not true. It is strange but sometimes you do feel a tingle in the spine when you walk through an ancient arch or stand in the middle of a neolithic stone circle.

“I just feel that the answers are here. She has them.” He pointed to the figure we had revealed.

“The priestess?” I asked. “I thought that you said yesterday that it was a self-castrated eunuch?”

“But look,” said Ev. “It seems different today. Smooth here and with definite breasts.”

He was right. I rushed to get the tracing. It made no sense. The figure was not the same. But I had been there. I had done it right. There seemed to be no explanation.

“I feel that the truth of what lies here is being hidden from us,” Ev was looking at what was in front of us with awe. It was very odd. “But we are men. We cannot approach this temple in that state. I think that is the message.”

“I think that we need to keep digging,” I told him.

We carried on with the excavation of the temple for the next few days, which were the last days we spent on the job before we were to cover the site up and close for the hottest two months of the year. In July and August in Northern Iraq the temperature exceed 40°C on most days, and that is too hot for even local workers to work, so shutting up is the only safety and healthy option.

I shook hands with Dr. Evelyn Traynor and we agreed to meet back on site 8 weeks later.

Perhaps I saw some difference in him even before we parted company that day. He did seem different somehow. But when he walked onto the site in the second week of September I was amazed. I scarcely recognized him, although it was difficult to see why. He was wearing his usual broad brimmed hat, or a new one very similar to the old one, and his usual khaki shirt and short pants with desert boots and knee pads. But when he took his hat off as he came to the awning to greet me, I saw that he was wearing a colorful bandana over seeming much more of his fair hair. Other changes became more apparent as I drew closer, including the fact that his legs were devoid of hair, and so was his face.

I had to say – “You look different, Ev.”

He laughed, but not in a way I had seen before – with a toss of the head and almost a giggle.

“We have lots to talk about,” he said. “I feel that I have a better understanding of what we are dealing with. I will tell you everything, but let’s have the lads get the covers off and get digging.”

He had always been energetic, but this was a new kind of vigor. But I was keen to get started too, and so we just put our heads down and went to work. It was a couple of weeks before we had a chance to speak in private and discuss what was going on.

“I have committed a capital crime in archaeology,” he admitted solemnly. “I have failed to declare a find.”

He unbuttoned his shirt, and there sitting against oddly smooth and soft-looking flesh was an amulet on a fine gold chain. I recognised it as one of many ancient fertility charms that can found all over the fertile crescent. Copies are for sale in markets in Baghdad and often enough a genuine one will turn up. It should have been handed it, but it was not a serious thing.

“Where did you find it?” I asked. “We should at least note the location as a part of the record.”

“That is just it. I didn’t find it here. I found it a fair distance from the dig on the very last day that we were here in June. It was as if I was guided to it,” he said. “I know you will think that I am nuts, but I feel that since I have been wearing it, I am getting closer to understanding this temple and the gods and priestesses that were here. I feel that I am becoming less male – becoming more female.”

I was shocked, but I tried not to show it. I remembered what he had said about being denied understanding because we were men. It seemed to me that Ev was somehow feminizing himself in some misguided belief that this might allow him access to secrets. It was supernatural thinking.

And as the weeks wore on, it seemed that Ev was doing everything to make it come true. Day by day his behavior was changing. We I first got back to the dig it was just a gesture or two, but then he started to use his hands in a feminine way, when he was not using a trowel, or even when he was. His voice seemed to change too.

And there were physical changes too. He claimed that body hair had ceased to grow, but I was thinking that he would have time t shave or pluck when we were back at our accommodation in the evening. And his body was changing shape, but I know something about how hormones work, and I know that there are powerful drugs that can do incredible things. I could see him touch his amulet occasionally, and there was now no escaping noticing that it nestled between two teenage-sized breasts.

And just when I rationalized how he could be working these changes himself, with the help of modern medical science he started talking about “communing with the goddess”. He suggested that we dig a trench way outside the walls of our ancient city on a small hill some distance away. I was opposed simply because there seemed no archaeological basis for this suggestion, but he pleaded in a way that made me feel uncomfortable enough to agree. Sure enough we found another shrine there.

Ev suggested that this was a place where menstruating women needed to go when they were being isolated, according to custom. They would actually leave the city to make some offering.

We went up there alone the two of us one evening, and Ev reached into his pants and pulled out his hand with blood on the fingers.

“What happened?” I said. “Are you hurt?”

“Don’t worry Tom. It’s natural.” That was what he said, sought of looking up at the evening star (which is Venus, or course) with an expression of awe.

He may have cut himself, or it may not have been blood at all. I suppose that I should have been more concerned about his sanity, but the truth is that we archaeologists are an odd bunch, and he seemed to be happy and working well.

When we parted company for the next trip home, I have to say that I could not stop thinking about Ev and what was going on with him. I was not sure if when I got back to Iraq Ev would have dropped this whole feminine thing because we now had the temple and the shrine largely excavated, or not. I found myself hoping for the latter, but I did not know why.

I arrived before him that season, and waited a week for his to turn up. When he did I got an even bigger shock than the year before.

I was in a trench, digging away. It was not the Temple of Inanna, but in what the Project consider to be a temple for the worship of Enlil, the principal male deity. I heard my name being called and I looked up, almost into the sun. There was a woman standing there, with the gentle breeze billowing her long dress, so thin in its fabric that I could see the shape of her body through it. She had a mass of blond curls but I needed to stand and let my eyes adjust before I saw who it was.

It was Dr. Evelyn Traynor, but now, from what I could see, totally a woman. She (and there was no other way to refer to her from that moment on) was wearing a little lipstick and eye makeup, but even without that she was quite beautiful.

“What you doing down there, Silly? You should be back with me in our excavation. Are you coming?” He voice was as feminine as she was.

I was at a loss for words. I may have mumbled something. I almost certainly stared, maybe even with my chin on my chest. I just mumbled something and found a way up out of that trench to follow her, her hips swinging, as we headed back to where we had been digging for many months.

“I need to get changed,” she said. “It is just that a dress is so much cooler and more comfortable. I have my stuff here, so if you don’t mind, I will just do it here?”

What was I going to say. I was transfixed as she pulled off her dress to reveal and bra nestling two very round and pert breasts, and apricot bikini briefs nestling nothing that I could see.

She pulled on her shorts and shirt. Some hair device appeared in her hand and with evident skill she twisted her blond curls clear of her neck and clipped the arrangement into place before putting on her brimmed hat.

I have to admit that the sight of the whole thing aroused me. For me that fact confirmed that I was looking at a woman.

“Before we do anything else I want to kneel for a moment and thank the goddess for my transformation,” she said, lacing up her desert boots and walking over to that first wall we had revealed. “I don’t expect you to do the same.” But I wanted to. I wanted to give thanks, even if I don’t believe in any of this stuff.

She stood quietly for a minute with her eyes closed. It made me think of others who may have done the same thing. Maybe people just like her – changed people.

We got on with work that day as if nothing had changed, but everything had. It was not just her, it was like the whole world had changed. It was as if magic had returned to the world, if it had ever existed. It was the best way to think of it, but it was not the logical way.

Then that night we stayed out at the dig while the sun set and we talked about how our progress had been received by our universities.

I had to say it – “And what do they think about … the changes in you.”

“It is a mystery to them,” she said. “But as I explained, it is what I wanted. People do less for science. Newton stuck a bodkin into his eye to understand light. I needed to know, and this is how I learned.”

It was still puzzling to me. We lay looking up at the stars on the burlap covers that were folded beside the dig. Then I felt her hand in mine. We both wore gloves, but my hands were still hard from the work we did, but hers seemed soft and small. It was a woman’s hand.

“Do you feel that I have become female, Tom? Would you like to make love to me?”

It was a strange thing to say, and an even stranger thing to hear. But the truth is that I did want that, more than anything.

She says that it was because I had spent the morning digging under the eyes of the god Enlil, lord of the earth and the sky, who issues forth lighting from his erect penis. There was no doubt that I felt potent in that department in the moment, but that may have been down to her, and watching her working her trowel in front of me all afternoon, with her perfect butt so close to my face.

“I have to explain that my transformation is not quite complete, but we can make love the Akkadian way,” she said. I knew what she was saying. In “The Epic of Gilgamesh” they spoke about the Akkadians as being closer to animals, but we found plenty of images of all manner of sexual positions in our research.

The moon, sacred to Ianna as with most female divine beings, was full as she undressed. I could see her perfect little breasts, and I could see that between her legs was a vestige of manhood, and no more than that. As she lay down, using folds in the material to lift her butt and present herself to me, I could see that there were no testicles, but I was in no state to investigate further. I wanted to be inside her and she wanted that too.

It was love we made – there is no doubt in my mind. That is why I can never leave her, despite my need to seek reason in all of this.

Of course the key physical changes too place in my absence. Hormones would have done there job and a surgeon could easily have removed the testicles and scrotum. There is a scientific explanation for that. And of course, she was a transsexual all along. Somehow the solemnity of the temple to Ianna and the mythology gave Ev the fillip that she needed to get things done that she may have been putting off.

I said to her that we can get a surgeon to do the rest, and then we can make love as a man and a woman, after a period for healing and recovery.

But she maintains that will not be necessary. She has performed a service to the goddess and in return that goddess will make her fully female, with the last steps in coming months. Of course I cannot believe that. I am a scientist – an archaeologist. All I do is rooted in reality and proper analysis.

But she wants me to wait and see, and the truth is that there is a part of me, maybe the greater part, that wishes that it just might happen.

The End

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Author’s note: The Goddess Ianna was said to have had the power to turn men into woman, and to have used that power. See https://hornet.com/stories/how-a-sumerian-goddess-turned-gender-on-its-head/