The Ransom

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Plenty of people said that I lucked out when I started going out with Delphine. I mean she was one of the prettiest and certainly the richest girl in school. I said that I didn’t know that. We met purely by accident. I didn’t even know who she was.

But that was all a lie. I exactly who she was. I had organized “the accident”. I was after her. I pretended that my family was rich but in fact we were dirt poor. I got into college on a fraternity scholarship. You know the thing - “look at how liberal we are in allowing the filthy poor into our holiest place”. I was a frat boy, or I could pass as one.

But I know the reality. I would get my commerce degree - it might even be a good one – but then I was on the heap with all the others. I had no money, no connections except maybe a bone thrown in my direction by one of my frat brothers. Brothers?! Give me a break! If only I could tell them where they could shove their charity. But when you are raised poor you know that you have to find your money where you can. You have to make sacrifices to get it. Pride is not even a sacrifice – it’s a state of mind.

Tying up with Delphine was not so bad, even as part of a long term plan. As I said, she was pretty enough, and I could live with her spoilt and demanding nature, for the cash. At least I thought I could, but I decided that I needed to bring her down a peg or two, but in a nice way.

“You should see how the other half live,” I said. “But Babe, you are too pretty. We will need to disguise you. I know, we’ll disguise you as a guy and we will go down to rough part of town incognito”.

I just wanted her to see that the majority of people in this country have it tough. They are not all dirt poor like my family, but your average low income family can struggle. I just thought that she needed to know. People like her just don’t.

I dressed her up as Dave with fake whiskers on her chin, and as it was cold a beanie over her hair, gloves on her hands and baggy warm clothes. We spent the night going around places. I pretended to be the spoiled frat boy shocked myself, but she truly was. We ended up being invited around to some squalid home for a meal of chitlings. She was horrified. I was quietly satisfied. I hoped that I had made a point.

“Now we are going the other way around”, she said. “I passed off as a guy in a world foreign to me, so it is time that you did the same. The world I am talking about is a rich girls pajama party, and you are going as a girl”.

I just laughed. I had to say – “You got me, show the dress I am wearing”. I mean, how could I say no given what I had put her through. Well, it was nothing more than life for those people, but I had to surrender to her stupid idea.

“This is not just a dress,” she said. “I became a guy for you last night. Nobody guessed that I wasn’t. It will be much harder for you to pass as a girl. Luckily we have a couple of weeks. We will need all of that”.

She insisted on hair extensions. I said that a wig would do. I saw some of these new wigs that look exactly like real hair, but she said that dressing as a man had been just so awful, I would need to suffer a similar fate. The wig was not the worst of it – I am talking a full Brazilian and facial treatments including eyebrow shaping and lip plumping.

“This is all just temporary,” she said. “Here am I still trying to rid myself of that ghastly experience being a man.”

I decided that the best way of coping was to tell her that I actually enjoyed wearing women’s clothes. I mean I pranced around in the form wear underclothes, saying how wonderful it felt. The weird thing was that it did feel good. I mean, I was pretending to enjoy it all, but it seemed as if I had convinced myself that I actually did.

I also sensed her enjoyment, although that puzzled me. Why would a woman take so much pleasure out of dressing her man as a woman? It was not to demean me, because my attitude put paid to that – I welcomed it. It was as if she had been deprived of dolls as a child and now had the opportunity to work with a life-sized one.

What I think surprised us both was how good I looked.

We put dresses on and heels on our feet and we packed our pajamas. Her father had a limousine pick us up to take us to the home of her friend in the country some distance away. We were both in high spirits, acting like a pair of silly girls, as appeared to be the objective. But from there things took a nasty turn.

We should have known that there was something amiss – not when the car came out of nowhere and rammed to front fender putting the limo out of action, but when another limo arrived on scene minutes later.

“I have just dropped two off at the party,” the driver said. “I can turn around and take you two there”.

Her father’s driver should never have agreed, but this other chauffeur seemed to know all about the party and being somebody working for people at the same level he appeared trustworthy. We both got in and we sped away.

Suddenly we turned off onto a dirt road. The limo driver turned and snapped: “Which one of you is Delphine?”

I said: “That is me. I am Delphine.”

I wish I could say that I had honorable intentions, but that was not the thought that was going through my mind. I suppose that you might understand that I was used to being a victim because I was poor. It seemed that the rich always fared better, so I claimed to be the rich one.

He left her in the car and took her phone. I was hustled along on foot some distance away where there was a black SUV with reflecting windows. I was bound, gagged and had a black hood pulled over my head, and then I was bundled inside the vehicle.

I did have the opportunity to call out – “Actually you have got the wrong one. I am not Delphine”. But somehow I did not think that would work. It now seemed that I had done the honorable thing by taking her place and sparing her being the victim of a kidnapping. That is the story she would tell her parents.

I decided that the best thing to do was to remain silent even after the gag was removed, in order to make sure that she got away. I thought that as long as they thought I was her, I had value. Maybe if they found out I was an imposter (why had I claimed to be her?) they would simply kill me. I had no idea who I was dealing with.

There were only two of them. They both now wore masks, but I could see that one of them had been the driver of the limo, so I already could remember his face. The second one just stood looking at me for quite a while.

“So, you are Delphine?” he said. He spoke as if he was educated, and I wondered if he might be rich, like the girl he thought he had kidnapped, and that this was some practical joke. I hoped that was true. He sounded slightly doubtful.

We were in a barn. The van had been driven right inside. There was hay and maybe sack of fertilizer, but it looked more like it used for storage of what I guessed might be stolen property. Right at the back was a toilet, and in two of the stalls on the right there was a raised floor – one was an office and the other a closed in room. I was led into that.

“Now Delhone, you are going to be the star of a short video,” the educated one said. “Here is the script. Stick to it.” He sat me on a chair and gave me a sheet that he had clearly prepared in advance, and he started to record me on a tablet.

“Daddy, I am unharmed and I am being treated well,” I began to read in the girliest voice I could muster. “But these are desperate men. They say that they have killed before and I believe them. They will give you 24 hours to find the money. It must be $1,000,000 in un-marked non-sequential $100 bills and It must be packaged tightly in waterproof wrapping. In 24 hours you will receive another message with proof of life and instructions. You must be ready to deliver the money then. Do not call the police. If any police are involved at the drop, I will be killed.”

After I had said all of that I thought I would say something useful, but I just ended up saying: “I love you all.” I thought maybe Delphine would think that it was meant for her – like a call for help from her. At least it could not do any harm.

But the truth is that I was not worth $1,000,000. I knew that. The best that I could hope for was for the police to track me down by catching my kidnappers at “the drop”. So, it made no sense to reveal myself as a guy. 24 hours to wait, at least.

“My friend here will look after you,” said the smart one. “You can call him Jack.”

I hear him get into the van, open the doors and drive off. I was still in the room which had canvas walls. I was bound at the ankles with a cable tie, with another tying me to a rope which limited the area I could move in, but I was not gagged, and my hands were free. I wondered about trying to find something to get free and making a run for it, but that seemed futile. I might be miles from anywhere or anybody. I thought that my time could be better spent working out who these guys were and getting them caught.

“You friend seems smart,” I said. “Where did he go to college? Did I detect and Inland Northern accent? You are definitely from Boston – right?”

I just got grunts.

“You said that you dropped some other girls off at the party – had it already started when you left?”

“I never dropped anyone off,” “Jack” said. “That was to get you into our limo. We stole that, by the way.”

“Wow, you must have been planning this for a while,” I said with a hint of admiration in my voice. “Don’t worry. You will do well out of this. My father will pay, and if you return me without a scratch I will happily insist that he not chase you down to get his money back.

“Damien says that he won’t even miss a million dollars.”

Suddenly this idiot has just let a name slip, and had finished the sentence before he realized. I felt that I should cover him. I could almost feel him pain, although through the mask I could see nothing.

“So, you friend’s name is David?” I said.

He just decided that the only response was silence, and he was probably right.

He walked silently away. He left the barn and closed the door behind him.

My prison had been well prepared. Cable ties are small but strong. All that is required is a sharp edge or even something abrasive to wear away some weakness in the plastic, but there was nothing.

The simplest thing seemed to be to wait it out. My worst fear was that this dipshit had given me a name, but what is one given name worth? Was it worth killing me, potentially losing the cash and facing life in prison? I have to say that waiting it out seemed like the long agony of uncertainty.

It seemed to take ages before the barn door opened again. It was not “Jack”. It was Damien, and he was not wearing a mask. That had to be bad.

“We have a problem, and I think that you know what it is,” he said. I could see that he had a knife in his hand. I am sure that all the blood must have drained from my head, as I felt faint. Where was the adrenalin? I just seemed paralyzed.

“David, is it? Look, please don’t kill me. You won’t get any money.”

“You know my real name,” he said. “I n=know why you are pretending that you do not.” He came closer.

“What does it matter? What is a name?” I backed away.

“Because they know the name. The family knows me. And I know the family. And I know that you are not Delphine. So if you are a stand in, how could they know something would happen today?”

“They didn’t know,” I said. “I just jumped in. Just to protect her.”

I saw the blade flash, but there was no pain or blood. My feet were free.

“Well, that makes you a good friend. A better friend than she deserves,” he said. “I don’t know why somebody like you would hang with her. All her friends are as spoiled and shallow as she is. You gave yourself. You are a special woman. Somebody like you deserves better friends.”

He helped me to my feet. His arms were strong but his touch tender. I had the strangest feeling. I felt safe. Perhaps it was just a contrast with the hours I had endured contemplating death, but now I had his strength and warmth. These were no male emotions. I smoothed out my dress.

“I must look awful,” I said. Where was all this coming from?

“Come up to the house,” he said. “I have brought in a meal and some wine. We need to talk. I need to find a way out of this. I am going to ask you to help me.”

“Where’s Jack?” I asked.

“He’s not Jack, just as I’m not David.” He gave a wry smile. “I have paid him off. He’s gone. This is all down to me. Even if you decide not to do what I ask, please leave him out of this.”

“He’s a dumbass,” I said. He held the door of the barn open for me, like a gentleman. It had never happened to me before, but I was new to being a woman.

“You are dressed for an evening out, so why don’t you take my arm?” he said, offering me his elbow. It all seemed very strange, so it was no stranger that I took it, and we walked across the gravel in my heels, and up the steps onto the porch of a large farmhouse.

“I shouldn’t ask, but is this your place?”

“It could have been,” he said. “With a million dollars I could have it back, and Delphine’s father could get his million back.”

“You don’t think he will pay?” I was starting to get some idea of what was going on. It seemed that I did not need to ask.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said, pulling out a chair for me to sit at the table in the large area adjoining the kitchen. “Maybe you could tell me? Are you worth it?” He slid the chair in behind me and poured two glasses of wine.

“Probably not,” I said. “But if he wants to trap you, will he use real money? He will try to trap you.”

“I have a pickup planned. I am tempted to run it and see what happens,” he said. “I have always assumed that he would try to catch me. They are those kind of people. He may even do it without going to the police.”

“Why?” I watched him place a large casserole pot on the table and dish out a rich stew into bowls.

“So that they can apply their own justice,” he said.

“Which is what you are trying to do, I am guessing?”

“Beautiful and clever,” he said smiling at me. It seemed to call for me to blurt out “and a man!” but I held my tongue by putting a fork to my mouth. The food was delicious.

“So, what will you do with me?”

“Ask you to stay. You don’t have to. If you walk away in silence I am spared. If you go to the police, I am done for. If you stay with me here for 24 hours then I can pick up the parcel and see whether it is cash or a bomb. You won’t have to sleep in the barn. There are rooms upstairs.”

“I’ll stay,” I said. It was more curiosity than anything else. I wanted to know how he would collect the ransom. I wanted to know who he was and who Delphine’s father truly was, and why he would go to this extreme to get money out of him.

I figured there was no downside. I was a prisoner but granted some freedom. I was a stand-in for Delphine – a hero of a kind, although my original motives were not noble. It seemed as if I had the opportunity to be right at the front to watch what played out. What I had not anticipated was the effect Damien would have on me.

He had me believing that I was a woman. It sounds so unreal, but he was so charming and kind that I found myself responding to him in the way he treated me. He had me giggling and being playful with him as a girl would be in the company of a gentleman.

He opened and bottle of wine and we drank that. Then when it became very late, he escorted me upstairs to a pleasant but dusty bedroom, clearly once the room of a young woman, and bid me good night.

For some reason I stopped him at the door. Before he slipped away into the dark corridor I kissed him on the cheek. It sounds ridiculous, but it felt right.

“I’ll help you,” I said.

I had strange dreams that night. In all of them I was not me. I was her. Not Delphine but a female me. Damien was in them too. When he got to the point of kissing me, or cupping my breasts or reaching between my legs, I would wake up with a start, only to fall back into another sleep and another dream of him.

When I woke the sun was shing into the room and I could have a better look around. There was a dust sheet over the dressing table and there was little in the drawers, but the wardrobe had some items of clothing in it. There were some dresses that were my size or smaller, like dresses that a country girl might wear to church, from the age of about 12 until fully grown. One of them seemed more appropriate than the party dress. There were shoes, but only the sandals could fit my larger feet.

From the stairs I could smell bacon and pancakes. He was standing there with a frying pan in his hand. I had a sudden urge to go to him and kiss him – that was how affected I was. But I just smiled and took a chair before he could seat me.

“I have to set up the drop off,” he said. “I will be back before dark. In the meantime I have made you breakfast.”

“Let me make you dinner then,” I said.

There was a chicken to roast. After he had gone I set about exploring the kitchen and the garden behind the house. It had gone to seed but there were things that could be foraged. I am not a home person but I know how to roast a chicken with the usual trimmings.

I spent that day as a farmer’s wife, I suppose. I could have just abandoned the pretense because Damien was not there, but the though never occurred to me. It just seemed that this was who I was, at least for the time being. It was like a release – even a fairy tale. What person, male or female, does not want to be a part of a fairy tale.

As evening came, I found myself listening expectantly for the sound of tires on the gravel by the barn. When I finally heard them I checked myself in the mirror in the hall to see that I was presentable, and if I was a 60s housewife.

As he walked in I felt my heart jump in my chest. The pull to run over and hug him seemed so strong that I had to clench my fists not to do it.

“We’re ready to go,” he said. “I am making a call which has been re-routed, so I can do it right here.”

He also used a voice disguising mechanism. He used the speaker so I could hear what he was saying. I was a part of this now.

“Do you have the money?” he asked the moment that Delphine’s father answered.

“I want to speak to Delphine,” the man said. I was guessing that his daughter was right beside him, but he was going through the motions.

“I am here,” I called out. “I am tied up but I am being well treated. They just want the money. Just give them the money please.”

“Don’t worry sweetheart. We have the money, packaged as requested.”

“Alright, now at 8:00pm take the package to Gandar Valley bridge and wait for another call. 8:00pm so you have two hours to get there. Delphine is right. We just want the money. We don’t want to hurt her but we will if this goes bad. In that case we would have nothing to lose.”

Damien hung up.

“You look great in my sister’s dress but put the dress on that you were wearing last night. Let’s eat and then I need to deliver you to the pickup point. I will put a hood over your head when we drive, just to keep you true to the story.”

“What if I want to come back here?”

“If you want to see me again after this is over, I will meet you where I leave you tonight, a week from tonight. Ok?”

We ate in silence, like troops about to go into battle.

We then drove for at least 30 minutes, and I cannot say in what direction as I could see nothing through the black hood. The last part of the drive was on a dirt road. He tool off the hood and we were in a clearing surrounded by forested hills, at the top of what I learned was Gandar Valley.

“I will am to tie you to this tree, but I will do it badly, so you can wriggle free,” he said. “But if all goes to plan Delphine’s father will drive up here within the hour.”

That is exactly what happened, but I learned later how the ransom drop off went down. A vehicle appeared driven by two thick set me, and with Delphine’s father in the back seat. I joined him there.

“I have no time for cross-dressers and your type,” he said. “But I owe you a debt for taking my daughter’s place. There will be a reward in it for you.”

Once again I found myself compelled to continue in my guise as a woman. Perhaps it was the manner in which he opened our conversation running down trans people, although quite why I identified with such people seemed odd.

“Have you paid a ransom? Did you catch those guys – the driver of the limo and the big black guy? How did they collect the money? I am just curious?”

“I have lost a bit tonight,” he said. But that and what I give you is a small price for keeping my daughter safe. As for how they got away, they were smart. I got to the bridge and there was a package there waiting for me. A case to put the money in tied to a float. I was instructed to put the money in the case and throw it and the float off the bridge. The river flows fast down there. One of them will be waiting somewhere downstream for the money, and he said that the other would be watching you in that clearing form one of the hills above to shoot you dead if the money was not paid. But as you had freed yourself that seemed like a lie.”

“So they got the money?” I asked.

“Not a million,” he said.

It was in fact, $101,800 dollars. 9 stacks of fake bills with a real bill top and bottom tightly packed, and one loose pack of real $100 bills. You can add to that the $5,000 dollars reward that I received and Damien and I had enough to start to buy back the family home.

As to how we managed to put together the other $873,000 we needed to actually do that, and how I became his wife, well, that is another story entirely.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2021

“