Rumspringa

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Ours had always been a very religious household. I guess Mom was really the key to that. Dad always said the strength of faith always comes from the women. But he was the elder in our church, and he seemed fully committed.

Me, not so much. I just never felt right. It seemed to me that faith in God and following a Christian path is supposed to settle all your internal problems, but it never seemed to do it for me.

It was not until I left home for my rumspringa that everything changed.

Maybe you don’t know what that is? Rumspringa is a period of time given to young people of the Amish faith to experience life outside our religious community; to sample the vices of the world outside, and hopefully return to the faith with a better understanding, and acceptance that the Godly path is the right path.

I really did not want to go. I would have been happy to stay. I thought that the problem that I was having, whatever it was, was about me, and therefore the answer was prayer, not a month of sin. But my older brother and some of the other guys my age pressured me into venturing out.

I never thought I was gay. I like the girls in our community, and I enjoyed being among them. I thought those feelings were normal. I was not sexually attracted to them, but I thought that this was because I prayed against temptation. I was not attracted to boys either, perhaps because of prayer, but more likely because then I was one of them. They were like my brothers, all of them. You are not sexually attracted to your own brothers.

When I say that I don’t know what suddenly changed me, it is because I cannot think of a single moment when I realized what I was. We never learned anything about what the word transgender meant – I had never even heard of it until rumspringa. Then I just gradually came to understand that it was the word that described me.

It is hard for people who have been brought up in a closed community to find their way in the world, but It hooked up with a transgender group in the city and they took me into my care. I remember that they were so kind to me I said that they must be Christian, but they just laughed. “We’re not religious, we’re your sisters,” they said.

Some people’s faith is shaken by death, disaster or injustice. Mine was shaken by kindness. They loved me not because of a direction from God, but because that was how they felt about me. They were good to me not because they feared Hell, but because they were just good people.

It makes you think about how my church would treat these good people, just because they are the way they are, which is the same way as I am. Why would a loving God damn these people? Why would he lake me as I am and then damn me?

I realized that I could not return to live a lie, let alone go back and present to them the real me.

I was lucky that I had a talent. I was an artist. I got some work with a design group, but I also started to paint on my own, mainly my naïve and colorful interpretations of urban life form the eyes of somebody who had never seen the like of it before. Perhaps because of that, my paintings became sought after and I sold a few for some very respectable prices.

When I had money coming in, I suppose that I went all out to be as much of a girl as I could be. I mean everything pink, lots of dresses and flowers, and hair styles. But for me it was not unlike the girls on rumspringa who had never worn mascara or lipstick, or how to use hair straighteners or a curling wand. I was just Anna, the Amish girl learning how to live as a normal girl in the city. It made it easier somehow.

Most families in our community just wait for their children to return from rumspringa. They wait and they pray, and usually everybody comes back. Some for good, and some to say: “Sorry, Mom and Pa, but I am going to live on the outside”. For some of those that means losing contact with their family forever, but nowadays the Amish are a bit more relaxed. That is why my friend Jessica, was able to invite people who had left that place, to her wedding held at our home church.

But I did not return, even to explain. My brother went back, and I told him to do his best to tell them what my choice had been, but I knew that my change meant that I could never even set foot in that place. I thought it better to never show my face – my new face – to my parents. They could say one last prayer for me and move on. That is what those Amish parents did who chose to exclude their own flesh and blood.

But my father came to the city. I was not sure why he was coming. Was he just wanting to confirm the truth? Did he intend to drag me back? Or was he just wanting to hear my story from my own mouth? He must have given my mother one of those explanations or all of them, but that is not why he came to the city, and why he came to stay with me.

It turned out that my father was just like me. I say that, but of course, the difference was that he had lived a life as a man and he was now over forty, but when we sat down to talk it was not me who was trying to explain why I needed to be a woman, it was him.

If there is one thing that life in a closed community teaches you it is that when somebody needs help you are duty bound to give it, especially if they are family. Of course, I allowed him to stay, and share some of my wardrobe, and everything else that a new woman needs.

And I promised not to tell Mom. That was hard. She had already lost a son, and now her husband. But Dad said that he was no longer a true husband to her. She had been spending more time with the man who was the leader of the community. He did not blame her because he was not performing sexually.

I did not ask whether that meant that my mother was committing the sin of adultery. My father did not say, and how could I press him? He seemed resigned to losing her. But for it to be a church leader stuck me that this might be yet another example of hypocrisy in our community.

My father said he must accept the end of his marriage because, unlike me, he had always known his problem. It was just that until my brother returned home and told my story, my father did not believe that there was anything that he could do about it. Now he wanted to know everything.

The transgender group got him a cleaning job – we Amish have few skills that are applicable to modern life. But soon, through my connections in the art world, I was able to get him a job in a craft studio doing fine carving and cutting work, where he had the skills that I suppose were behind my talents. “Naomi” was able to generate some of her own money and buy her own clothes.

But all that Naomi wanted was to grow her hair and her breasts, and get her vagina installed. It could not happen soon enough. I was still experimenting with a sex life where I had everything, or so it seemed. I saw a future for myself having bottom surgery, but I was not in such a hurry as Naomi. Still, she led the way and showed me the path, and for that I am grateful.

But still, Naomi never contacted Mom to tell her what was going on. In the end I had to do it.

The occasion was another wedding at our community. My best girlfriend in the community was Jessica, who had returned from rumspringa no longer a virgin and keen to find a man to experience regularly what she had only just sampled. She had found Brad, a man in the local town who was Christian and whose land shared a boundary with community land so that he could be accepted as a “quasi-member”. I was invited to the wedding as Anna. So, I would be going back.

Our community does not use telephones, so I had Mom use Brad’s phone to speak with me. I used a deeper voice, but even then, she barely recognized it was me. I said that I was coming back to attend Jessica and Brad’s wedding, and Dad would be coming with me as far as the town outside the community. I explained that when she saw me, she may not recognize me, because for the last few years since I left, I had been living as a woman – Anna. That was who I was now.

She cried. She wavered between saying that she wanted to see me and being to afraid to see what I had done to myself. It was not until she had worked through all of that, that she asked about her husband. She did not ask why he had not returned to her. And when I said that he was the same as me she seemed less surprised.

I was not even sure that she would come into the town to meet her husband the day after the wedding, but she did. My father dressed for the occasion in something very feminine but with makeup understated. When I looked at her, I realized that in only a year she had lost all the hard edges of forty years of working the farm and had become soft and quite pretty.

Still, it was a shock for my mother. Afterall, her son and then her husband had left her, and this is the sight that greeted her.

Who can blame her for bursting into tears? Luckily women like the three of us are now, know how to share our tears.

The End

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