Dad’s Readjustment

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Dad would always make us cringe with the things he said. There was less of the racism since Dwayne moved next door – the perfect neighbor who just happened to be black. But instead, Dad would go on and on about gays and trans-people – how it was unnatural and disgusting, and showed that the nation’s moral had descended to the sewer. He and Dwayne seemed to be at one on that.

We get a lot of ideas from our parents, and then when we learn about life, we have choices. Maybe the same thing applied to him. I guess that Dad was “Generation X” and had lived through liberalization of ideas when people have to take a side. Some embraced change, but a good number went the other way. He was one of them.

Both of us could not agree with Dad. Neither me nor my sister were interested in LGBTQ issues, but we believed in the rights of people to live their own lives. I suppose Wanda and me are “Generation Z” who know only technology, and look to see how we can fix things with the right app. That is probably why we suggested that Dad engage in a little experiment that we hoped might give him a better understanding of what he hated so much.

I had bought a cool VR setup and Wanda had bought in some cool apps. One of them was something that I thought was pretty stupid – it allowed you to meet people from history and interact with them. Basically, you sit in a chair and have the head set and gloves and a few sense stimulators and the pick an avatar and people you would like to meet. Generally it is the same setting – it is some high-powered reception and you move around even in your seat, and find the person you want. Like you walk up the Abraham Lincoln and shake his hand and a fairly realistic virtual 19th century president talks to you in his voice and manner.

Wanda thought it was a great game. She had a series of avatars locked in. She had the serious woman to meet Eleanor Roosevelt, but a glamorous one to mix it with Marilyn Munroe.

She told Dad about the game. He asked whether he would be able to meet Joe McCarthy or George Wallace, and Wanda checked the system to confirm it. There were all kinds of people, and the best ones were from recent history where photographic images could be turned into realistic 3D images. If there was sound that could be turned into the original person’s voice. As for content, that was driven by algorithms based on character traits and recorded phrases.

‘But the only problem is that you will have to meet those guys as me,” she said. “Or rather, you will be in female form, and you will have to act appropriately to engage with them. The game works so they react to what you do, and they can just turn and walk away. You wouldn’t want that?”

No. Dad wanted to play, but he was concerned. That was when Wanda involved me and I offered to show Dad how easy it would be. After all, it was just an avatar. I had to explain the concept to him.

I saw immediately that male avatars could be created, but I realized that this could be good for Dad. He was dismissive of women and hated trans-people, but this would be a chance for him to understand gender better. He would live in this environment as a woman.

So we nestled Dad into the interactive chair and activated the headset. We told Dad that he was on his own, but the truth is that we could watch him in this virtual world on connected monitors. We had two views – one was the same view as Dad, and the other was a view of his character.

The first image was of Dad walking down a wide hallway towards set of double doors. On the second screen we saw the image of the woman he appeared to be. She was beautiful. This was Wanda’s glamorous evening persona, and somehow Dad had been able to add some maturity to her, by some unknown process. She had blonde hair styled impeccably and her makeup was perfect, and she was wearing a figure-hugging gold lame dress and nude heels.

She was stumbling about the hallway and lifting her hands to examine the shaped nails painted in a neutral shade. Dad was still learning how to work the control – forward and back and raising and lowering the hands. Wanda and I looked at one another and sniggered.

He finally made his way to the door and opened it. On the other side was a ballroom with people milling around. Just as the app had said these were people from history – most from recent times – brought back to some semblance of life by skilled program developers.

“I am looking for Joe McCarthy.” Dad had meant to be talking to us, or himself, but people in the game responded so that he understood his speech operated to trigger action. Several people pointed or nodded in the same direction, and Dad headed off, becoming increasingly easy in his movements.

He could not help but look around. Dwight Eisenhower was talking with Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy, but James Dean was there too, and Marilyn Munroe. Why would Dad want to talk to a man like McCarthy? Anybody else in the room would be more interesting. I guess it was just because Dad said that was what he wanted, or he wanted to share his spite with a man who was said to be full of it.

Then there he was. The image was clearly fashioned from old newsreels. The color was added later. But it was life-like enough.

“Senator McCarthy, could I speak with you for a moment?” Dad said.

“Well yes, Ma’am,” Joe replied. “I always have time to chat with a beautiful Lady. Who am I addressing might I ask?”

Dad was flummoxed. For some reason he said – “My name is Doris.” Doris! Why Dad, why?

“Well, Doris, how may I help you?” said the senator.

“I just wanted to say that I admire you taking on the liberals and the communists the way that you have done. They will continue to be a big threat in the future, I must tell you. The work you started continues but without the vigor you showed.” Dad was almost simpering in his praise. We were hearing his voice the way that it was in that virtual world – breathy and feminine.

“The work continues, Ma’am,” said Joe.

“I am not sure whether this will ruin things for you but I have to explain that I am … I am from another time in a way … and I am not really what I appear to be … I am not actually a woman.”

“Well, isn’t that interesting,” said Joe. “Have you still go everything intact in your shorts?”

“Yes,” Dad said. Had he checked he would have been proven a liar.

“I have to say that you have fooled me. You are very attractive. Just like that Christine Jorgensen. That person is here somewhere. Somebody just like you – born a man – and he served in the army. You should go looking and introduce yourself. But I don’t approve of what has been done – cutting away God’s gift and all.”

“I agree,” said Dad. “I shudder at the thought.”

“Really.” Suddenly Joe’s look seemed to change. It seemed incredible that such a slight switch in expression could be conveyed by these computer generated faces. “Well, you secret is safe with me, so I feel that I can share one with you. The fact is that I am not a lover of women. I am unmarried, although given some recent events I will need to consider doing that to crush the rumor that I bumfucked one of my personnel while on military service. It’s a lie of course – I bumfucked scores of them. Only one has come out to talk about it.”

I could see the expression on Dad’s face. It was one of horror. But it was clear that it had not registered for the virtual Joe McCarthy.

“Still, if you have a what I like below the belt I would love to get to know you better,” he said. “You could be just what I need. I really do need a wife. Perhaps we could …”.

Dad was walking away. His first right wing hero was a self-confessed sodomizer. He was looking for his back up. Where could he find George Wallace.

Being so intent he bumped into a woman. This virtual world seemed to allow for this to happen. She turned to face Dad. She was tall and possibly middle-aged although she could have been much younger. She had a strong jaw, a mass of blonde curls around her shoulders and the most remarkable blue eyes. Those alone were able to stop Dad advancing further in those high heels.

“Do I sense a fellow woman in distress?” said the woman. She reached out her hand to introduce herself – “I’m Shere Hite. Have you heard of me?”

“No,” said Dad. “But I guess if you are in this room, you must be famous.”

“Maybe not that famous,” her smile revealed perfect teeth. “But there are too many men in this room, don’t you think? We women should stay together.”

“You must be a feminist,” said Dad. “But a very glamorous one.”

“You have to use what you have been given,” said Shere. “I once worked as a model. I even posed for Playboy. I have never depended on a man, or not since my stepfather left. I learned from my mother how to use good looks to get on. I don’t regret anything. I love being a woman, especially a beautiful one – don’t you?”

“Men talk down to you,” said Dad, clearly ready to talk. “And I see them staring at me. I know what it feels like to be thought of as a sex object.”

“My husband calls me that,” grinned Shere. “Except he calls me ‘his sex object’. But then he is almost 20 years younger than me, so I love it. When you turn 40 being called a sex object is gratifying. It makes you understand how easy it is to control men if you set your mind to it.”

“Are men that easily controlled?” Dad asked.

“Oh, they are, as any man who gave it any thought would have to admit. But they can’t do that, you see. That would be an acknowledgement of our superiority. They can’t do that. But most women don’t know their power either. I think maybe you do.”

“I think I am beginning to realize,” said Dad.

“It feels good – doesn’t it,” said Shere, smiling in a way that should have turned on any man, but had a different effect on Dad. She walked away without waiting for a response.

A man walked up to Dad, and we could see that he could not place him, but I knew him immediately.

“Do not move my Darling,” the squat balding fellow instructed Dad, who seemed a bit shocked by the encounter. “You are a goddess,” said the little in heavily accented English – Dad would have guessed French or some other European. “You are the most beautiful woman in the room, perhaps even the entire country.”

“Thank you for saying so.” The virtual woman did not have the capacity to blush, but if she had she would be glowing red.

“It must be a wonderful thing to walk on air above us mere mortals, and to look down on our filth and greed from the summit of such splendor!” The man seemed used to giving compliments. “Would you do me the high honor of letting me paint you, Madame. My name is Pablo Picasso.”

“I have heard of you,” said Dad, who was no great admirer of art. “Don’t you paint people with one eye or something?”

“I paint what I see, and in profile I see only one eye,” said the little man. “But I also paint what I feel, and in you I see the power of your sex.”

“Actually, I have just bee talking about that with … I am not sure where she has gone.”

“I see no one else,” said Picasso. “Only you. I am blind to lesser creatures. Let me paint you. Only then can I see again.”

“Sure. Why not?” said Dad. “But don’t you have a reputation for bedding the women you paint?”

“Art is an aphrodisiac. What can I say. I am human. You are something higher. Call my agent. Let me give you her card. For tonight I must share you with the room. You will touch many hearts. We are all blessed by your presence.” He took Dad’s hand and kissed it.

Dad visibly pulled himself together and the moved through the room. Finally he saw George Wallace - not in a wheelchair - this was George Wallace in his prime. The man who had stood up against the forced integration of races in the interests of freedom.

“I am a big admirer of yours,” Dad bubbled. “My name is … my name is Doris.” She still was, it seemed.

“I appreciate support from the fairer sex and you are certainly that, Ma’am,” said Wallace. “I have had the great honor of being married to two different women. My first wife Lurleen I married during the war, and she supported me in all my politics, including her taking over as Governor of Alabama when I had exceeded the maximum term. She defeated a strong field to keep a Wallace in the Governor’s mansion. I was so proud of that woman. Then when she was taken by cancer, 3 years later I married Cornelia. She was by my side when I beat that Sissy Britches Al Brewer to win back the governorship even with black votes against me. Let me tell you, Doris, strong women, like the woman I can see you are, are the strength of this nation. You should be proud to be of your sex.”

“I never really thought about it until tonight, but I suppose that I am,” said Dad. It seemed as if he had forgotten about what he planned to talk about with this man. Instead, he saw somebody he thought he recognized. He simply walked away from George Wallace towards the tall blonde standing surrounded by men.

“Are you Christine Jorgensen?” said Dad.

“Yes, I am,” she said with a smile that beamed with confidence. She seemed to wave the men away so that she could talk exclusively to Dad. “I love that outfit you are wearing. It really shows off your figure nicely.”

“I have had a few stares from men in the room,” Dad admitted. “To be honest I am new to this, and it does make me feel a little strange.”

“But you love it – right?” said Christine.

Dad was thinking before answering. What would he say? We waited.

“Actually, I do,” he said. “Perhaps I like it even more because I am like you, Christine – can I call you Christine?”

“Of course, Darling. That is my name. And I have to say that I am astounded at your news, but pleased. You are so very attractive and feminine. It is so much better to be good looking, but even if I wasn’t I would be happy just to be female. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, I have not quite got that far yet,” said Dad.

“Oh, of course. I was lucky to have found a surgeon,” said Christine. “But there is more that can be done. Things have advanced since my surgery. You are lucky to have more options, but I am happy where I am.”

“So, no regrets?”

“None, Darling. Some don’t have the power to choose, but we do. Who would ever be a man if you could be a woman. The world comes alive for a woman. The drudgery of manhood is like the army, one day after the other, same clothes, same look, same job, same pals. When I became a women I closed the door on that and found myself standing in a field of flowers with the world all around me.”

“That sounds so beautiful,” said Dad.

“We are not to be pitied, Girl,” said Christine. “We are so lucky. Be who you have to be.”

“Thank you,” said Dad. “I think I will leave now.”

Dad just stood there.

Wanda said – “I think Dad wants to leave the simulation but doesn’t know how.”

I agreed. It was as simple as pushing a button. The screen we had been watching went blank save for the caption “Simulation Terminated”. We turned to the chair.

There was the real Dad sitting there having removed the head set and gloves. But there was something different about him – something that was hard to work out.

I said – “Does that give you a new perspective, Dad. Do you understand trans-people now?”

“I do understand,” said Dad, so softly that it barely sounded like him. “I understand why I was so hostile. It is because I am one. Deep down inside I am a woman and I always have been.”

Wanda and I stared at one another. We were shocked. But that was only the beginning.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2023

2939