Agony

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Dear Bonnie,

“I am in a real mess. My sister has been so lonely that I felt sorry for her. I started sending her sexy messages on a social network site but now she seems to have fallen for the guy I am pretending to be. I don’t want to hurt her even more by letting her down. What do I do?

Caring Brother.”

“Dear Caring Brother,

“You need to let her down softly. I suggest that you write to her saying: “I am sorry for deceiving you but I am not the man you think I am. I am not even a man. You are just so beautiful and now that I have been chatting with you I know that you are a wonderful person. But as you think I am a guy, it would be wrong to take this any further. Please try not to hate me, but this will be my last message. You deserve happiness and I am sure it is just around the corner.”

Try that.

Bonnie”

“Dear Bonnie,

“I just wanted to say that you letter worked a treat. My sister was more angry than sad, but somehow she feels good about herself. I think that shows and that is why she now has a read admirer chasing her. You are the best. Thank you

Caring Brother.”

“You are the best,” said Clyde. “The readers just love this kind of stuff. You are much better than Maggie was. You are a natural. But we do have a problem.”

I had qualified in psychology, but I have always considered that my great qualification to give advice was the words of my grandmother and my father. My grandmother was wise, but more importantly, phrases of her wisdom would fall off her tongue constantly. They were almost always, pithy and memorable. I remembered them, or at least I remembered all of those that I remembered.

My father was also wise but in a different way. He always told me to listen and to consider before giving advice. He was a lawyer, and had inherited his mother’s gift with language, but she was instinctive, he was driven by logic and took care with the advice he gave.

I first became involved with magazine journalism when I was asked to contribute specific advice on mental health for Maggie Goulburn. Maggie ran an agony column for a widely distributed magazine, and she was also syndicated for a series of smaller periodicals. There was talk about her going online, but she had said that she was getting too old.

“You should do it,” she said. “You are intuitive. What you lack in experience you can make up with good common sense, and you can always refer to my back catalogue of replies. It belongs to the magazine after all. The same problems keep reoccurring, and the same solutions usually apply. You just need to reword your responses to keep them fresh.”

She had done very well, and I knew that she could do better by taking her column on line. I seriously considered becoming her successor.

“But you cannot be me,” she said. “You will need to be a new identity. Oh, and of course, you must be a woman.”

Men may consider this offensive, but the fact remains that the vast majority of readers of the magazine, and her column in particular, were women, and they wanted the advice of another woman. There were male agony columns but they had a different audience. Her audience expected her successor to be a woman. A younger woman perhaps, but a woman with wisdom and common sense, and an instinct for understanding the person posing the issue to be addressed.

I took over. I became Bonnie, on the page, and online. Bonnie the Wise. Bonnie the Good. The solver of problems. And everything seemed to be going so well before Clyde called me in to discuss “the Big Problem”.

“Talk shows,” he said. “They are the life blood of publicity. People buy magazines or go on line looking for things that they hear about on talk shows. We need Bonnie out there. The material is great, but we can double or quadruple the uptake if she goes before an audience.”

“Who do you have in mind?” I asked him. “Who could be Bonnie in front of the TV camera?”

“No, no, you’ve got this all wrong,” said Clyde. “It can’t be an imposter. They won’t be able to do what you do. It has to be you.”

“What?! How do you propose we do that?” I still had no idea what he was thinking.

“We can help you. We can do it. We have all the resources. We can bring a powerful team together to make it happen. We sell women’s magazines, for crying out loud. We sell makeovers every day.”

“You are not serious.” I was grinning. Well for a while I was. Then … not. “No, no,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” he replied.

“I’ll never pass as a woman,” I exclaimed. “Not in a million years.”

“You under-estimate yourself,” he said, and then to my dismay he added: “Or perhaps you over-estimate your masculinity”.

I think what he was talking about was my small and slight build, but it sounded cruel and belittling. I suddenly felt that I did not need this at all. I was a columnist now, not just a junior journalist – I had a following. Should he be talking to me this way?

Maybe he could sense my annoyance. He said: “Look, this column is a valuable property. If we increase syndication, we will be sharing that with you. You can a lot of money. And awful lot of money. But only if we get nationwide coverage of Bonnie. That means chat shows. It cannot be a front person pretending to be the author of this column. No matter how well briefed a Bonnie impersonator might be, she won’t be Bonnie if she is put on the spot. You have to do it yourself, and you will be the one who will benefit.”

“I don’t need this, Clyde,” I complained. “I can write other stuff.”

“We don’t want any other stuff,” he said. “There are so many other freelancers selling me copy. The journalism schools turn out three graduates for every job going. I don’t need to hire any of them if they are hawking stories. I just pick the copy that is good and pay what I like. Welcome to modern journalism. The permanent workforce is reducing all the time. But you will stay on the payroll. You have a gift. If you want to confine it to this publication you can make a living, but if you do as I ask you can make a fortune.”

I felt deflated. I leaned back in my chair. I said: “What are you proposing I do?”

“The ladies from the beauty section will have a few weeks to prepare you to be Bonnie,” he said. “Then I have three local and two national talk shows ready to talk to you.”

“But I am lying to the public,” I said. “They will find out.”

“Not if we can help it,” he said. “We will all need to keep this up so that we don’t break the spell. Come to work as Bonnie from now on. You can lead a private life as yourself, but as Bonnie you might well become a celebrity, and …”.

He stopped and shrugged his shoulders. You complete his sentence. There is a private life, and there is a public life. Did he have an idea about what was to happen? He never finished. I was busy in myself thinking about syndication revenues and the deal I could do. He was on the phone telling Kat in the beauty section and Noeline in fashion that it was now over to them.

The it was up to me too, now assigned to the fashion and beauty desks for a crash course in becoming a credible woman.

But who better than Kat and Noeline, and the others including photographers and contributors?

“I followed some of your agony aunt advice,” said Kat. “It was spot on. You’re a genius. Everybody is going to love you. If we do a good job, we may even be able to get product placement sponsorship. Our first celebrity on the staff.”

At the time, I had no idea what she was talking about. I was just looking at the whole array of cosmetics on her table and realizing that I had just landed on another planet. But I could not survive as an alien on Planet Female. I would need to acquire a new body and a new face.

“You’ll need to have a full body wax before we start talking about shapewear,” said Noeline.

“But surely I need only be hairless in the parts that show?” I protested.

“This is not pretending, Bonnie,” she said, using the name that I would now be carrying at work. “You will be a woman from the skin up all over. What goes on under the skin is less of a concern to me.”

“You are so lucky to have such a good amount of hair,” said Kat. “We shouldn’t hide that under a wig. There is enough to work with. We will promote a little growth and get some color and volume into it. I can see you already. We need to project confidence. Your face and hair need to say: ‘Trust me, I am clever and beautiful’. That is the look we want.”

“Ok.” What can be said? Just meek agreement. I put myself in their hands. I know my stuff, and they know theirs.

It turns out that their stuff is a whole lot more that any man could contemplate. I had to spend days “unlearning” masculine behavior before I could start to learn how a woman behaves. Kat and Noeline required a 24 hour commitment. That means not just at work, but living a feminine life at home and at sleepovers with either of them, and even sleeping in a nightie.

Bonnie gradually started to take shape. I was not convinced by my first sight of her, but as the weeks went by it was becoming clear that despite my own uncertainty, I would be able to do this. What convinced me was a series of outings with Kat and Noeline where I was the third woman. To everybody we met we really were three girls shopping together or out on the town.

Clyde confirmed my first appearance, on a local chat-show. I was a little nervous, but I knew I could not show it. ‘Trust me, I am clever and beautiful’. I repeated it like a mantra.

Kat and Noeline had arranged some sponsorship. All I needed to do was to refer to the dress as being by such and such, the shoes are what’s his name and the makeup was by whoever. Not hard to do.

I was welcomed on stage and put my walking practice to work, then sitting with skirt under and legs crossed at the thigh – much easier given that my groin was bound up completely. Open my voice and with coached tones reply: “Thank you. Great to be here.”

Once prompted I had a bit of story to explain my rough edges: “I was brought up on a farm. I had two older brothers. I was a bit of a tomboy, I guess. But I think that practical living helps somebody to find practical solutions. City life is so complicated. A farm girl like me tends to see things as being rooted in simple problems.”

“But you have been to college? You have a degree?”

“When I give advice, I tend to put that to one side,” I told her and her audience. “My readers don’t want science, they want sense.”

Call me a natural. Tell me I am intuitive. This horseshit just rolled off my tongue.

On that first show I was a hit. Don’t read the reviews, just look at the sales of such and such dresses following the screening of that show. And then there were the calls to Clyde: ‘How can we get Bonnie on our show?; ‘We would be interested in having Bonnie’s agony column in our daily’; ‘How can we have Bonnie endorse our products?’.

“You can lead a private life as yourself, but as Bonnie you might well become a celebrity, and …”. And you might find that you don’t have a private life anymore. The truth is that is more or less what happened.

I could say that the pressure of constantly changing persona got to be a drag (a deliberate pun) so I sort of slipped into being Bonnie more and more - but I think that would be a lie. I liked being Bonnie. She was an invented person and inventions can be so much more interesting than reality. In my case that was certainly true.

There were somethings about stepping into the public as a woman that were a chore. It took time to get ready, but after a while you learn that taking the time to look good has its own rewards. Wearing heels all day can be hard, but I wore lower heels than many and I learned how to be comfortable.

But whatever the downside, the upside was adoration, and that makes everything better than bearable. I was style and opinions were valued by women, and I was now acquiring a whole set of fans – men. It was not just that I got the occasional indecent suggestion, I received proposals for marriage from some very eligible gentlemen.

I am not sure where it came from but a rumor sprung up that I was dating the young bachelor mayor of my hometown, all based on a single photograph of us laughing together. It was so ridiculous that it hardly seemed worth denying.

Then I received a call from that very man. I will not name him for obvious reasons, but I will refer to him as Jack.

“I am looking for advice, and you seem to be the person to give it,” he said. “I am supposed to be dating a woman that I have only met just the once. She does not appear to be denying it, so does that mean that if I asked her out, she would be likely to say yes?”

“Interesting case, Mr. Mayor,” I said. “Would you want to invite her out?”

“Yes I would,” he said. So how could I say no.

It turned out that Jack had political ambitions beyond being simply a small city mayor. He was only a few years older than me, but it seemed that he had his life all mapped out. The advice I would have given if he asked more for it was to relax a little, but he was a driven person, and I liked that. But somehow there seemed to be a “but” in his story that was missing, and I thought that I knew what it was. Was it a new woman’s intuition or something that a man could see in another man?

“If you tell me your secret, I will tell you mine,” I said.

He looked at me with a puzzlement that then turned into concern.

“You may think that in this modern world it is something that I should acknowledge and announce,” he said. “It is just that it is not the person I am, or the person I want to be.”

“I am living a lie too,” I said. “But I am becoming used to it. Maybe even coming to enjoy it.”

“You’re gay too?” he asked.

“No. I’m a guy.” There. Said.

His mouth fell open and then closed into a huge smile.

“How absolutely perfect,” he said. “It seems that we share the same politics and the same orientation.”

I was going to say “Oh no, I’m not gay”, but something made me pause. Maybe it was the look in his eyes? I was just smiling back. I said: “Now we share our own secrets”.

“I’d like to see you again,” he said. “More than once, if you are willing”.

“In my present circumstances I find myself available most evenings,” I said. “I go out with the girls from work every now and again, but …”. I was going to say something about there being no one in my life, but again I stopped myself.

We kissed when we parted. Nothing to passionate, but on the lips – tender. Like the promise of things to come.

What he wanted was a woman on his arm, and preferably one who added to his political image. Who better than a woman who was renowned to be both beautiful and wise, in a down-home practical way. I would be the perfect partner for such a man. The perfect wife. If Jack had his way, the perfect first lady.

But as I say, Jack is not his name, and Bonnie is not mine. It is another given name on my column, and I carry my husband’s surname now, even though we are not actually married. He is a senator now, and I am his wife. My breasts are my own these days, but he insists on no other changes.

I am not sure whether we will achieve all his ambitions, especially now those who read this story will be reading magazines to find the name of the wife of a senator who writes an agony column.

The End

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