The Long Night

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

It was some years ago that the opportunity came up, and I was ready for it. I had been throwing break-out tongs as a roughneck on a drilling ship for a while, and it was when I was working off Norway in those days that I heard about the Spitzbergen Winter Shift.

It was an underground mining operation in on one of the most far-flung land masses on the planet. Spitzbergen (in Norwegian “Svalbard”) straddles the Arctic Circle as only the very northern part of Greenland and a few Russian and Canadian islands do. That means that it has winters in almost total darkness. The weather in all but a couple of months of summer was so bad that it is a wonder that anybody would want to live there.

In those days the principal town called Longyearbyen had a small population, mainly Russians. But the larger all year populations were in the two coal mines operating at the time - Svea Nord in Sveagruva run by the Store Norske Spitzbergen Coal Company, and the Russian state-owned Arktikugol mine in Barentsburg. Contracts were available at Svea for coal miners. I was not a miner, but it was operation of heavy machinery in difficult conditions, and my oilrig experience was qualification enough.

The pay offered was outstanding, but that was because of the conditions of the contract. It would be 9 month’s work, and basically that would be 9 months living and working underground, with the winter months being in totally isolation. The whole term would be provisioned and catered, which mean that there as the potential to walk away with what would be more than I was earning on the ship on the ship for a whole year, with not a single deduction except local tax. In those days Norwegian tax for the energy sector was only 5%.

I had a plan to build a bar and restaurant on a Greek island, and this would go a long way towards that. The problem for me had always been saving. The oil exploration industry is full of cowboys with a “work hard - play hard” creed, which means “spend hard - lose hard” too. I was drinking and snorting all of my money from the moment I got ashore, and I needed that to stop.

I signed up and shipped out to Spitzbergen.

The Svea Airport was not yet built so we flew into Longyear and then we had to go 200 miles around to the next bay to the South by boat. It was only 20 miles between the two outposts, but there is still no road between them, or anywhere much on the islands, for reasons that might be clear if you were to look at the place on Google Earth.

Even in late summer there was snow everywhere, but where there was no snow there was just grey and brown shingle. It was a depressing place, even when the sun shone, because we were in a deep fjord with mountains on each side casting shadows as the sun always lay to the south.

Underground was a paradise by comparison. It was brightly lit and warm. Even in a place that far north the temperature is warm at 50 feet down, and incoming air was warmed in the lower tunnels. Inside the mined out “rooms” there were structures made of plywood with heavy curved corrugated steel rooves which served as our living quarters with tubed passages between some, and others you would just walk to across a levelled dirt floor with the cavern above, with steel netting and bolts to prevent rock fall. Some of them were so large and high that you could look p and almost imagine that the dark ceiling was a starless summer night.

These areas were clen, but in levels below, the coal dust made everything dirty. Coal is soft and lightweight so mining it with machinery is not hard. The only thing is to make sure that the roof stayed up, by leaving pillars. This was in the early days of continuous mining machines, but we had two, and I drove a flat loader which could also work a wall.

Coal dust washes off, and the relocatable showers and lockers were at the shaft, so that could change into off work overalls “Zoot suits” and get to accommodation levels clean, and keep them clean. People would say that those who only knew the accommodation levels would have no idea just how dirty our work was. I mean people like Johnny.

Johnny was a steward. Like everybody else he was signing up for a spell in a highly paid prison, but he was no miner. A steward works in the mess hall - the dining room - and sometimes in the kitchen and stores. The mining company knew, just as oil companies know, hard workers need good food, and they want it presented to them. It was all buffet, but it needed to look good and taste better. Johnny did not make the food, but he manned the counter.

We had in our team a man they called Spud. I guess I assumed he was Irish, but that was probably because of the name. We had people from all over the planet, but we all spoke in English. Even the geologists, one from Norway and one from Sweden, who speak languages almost the same spoke to one another in English. They both said “I can’t stand his accent when he tries to speak my language” even though they weren’t trying to do that. Spud’s accent may have been one of the weird British ones, or from somewhere in Europe. I never found out.

Spud was not a nice person. He was big and he was a bully. But he saved something special for Johnny. Almost from the first day he started calling Johnny Joannie.

“This tastes like shit,” he would say. “I’ll call over the waitress. Hey Joannie!”

Johnny said to one of the guys that he was going to get his hair cut. It was long, and in those days long hair needed to be in a net, which made Johnny look closer to Joannie than most would be prepared to say. But somebody told Spud about the proposed trim.

“Don’t you dare cut that pretty hair,” he said, with eyes visibly darkening. “It will be the last thing you ever do.”

We all looked at Johnny. It was pretty clear that he was terrified, and to be honest, I thought he had cause to be. But nobody told Spud to leave him alone. People just laughed. In fact everybody started called Johnny Joannie from that day on.

In those first few weeks we had the opportunity to go in to Longyearbyen before the ice closed us in for at least 4 months over winter. I actually chose not to go. The main town was still just a collection of huts in those days, with just one bar that was not much better than our canteen when opened liquor sales for one day a week. Spud went and he and some others bought some items at the store.

I have no idea why there were women’s clothes and other items for sale there. I never saw any women on Spitzbergen, but I heard that there were some female research scientists somewhere on the islands over the summer. Anyway, Spud and his pals returned with some clothes that they insisted Joannie were for her new role as their personal “waitress”.

The first time Joannie but on the costume it was treated as a joke, and maybe that was how it started, but it just never stopped. Spud, supported by others, insisted that Joannie have shaved legs, and wear a little of the makeup they had managed to buy.

The undercurrent of violence was unmistakable. It is easy to say that somebody should have stood up for somebody not strong enough to help themselves, but this was a tough place. Everybody had the view that if you were not up to it, you shouldn’t be here. Other people called it “harmless fun”, although was not one of those.

And there was no escape. A few weeks after the shopping trip the snow and ice trapped us in. The fjord was frozen solid and the boats drawn onto the ice, and with no airstrip the only way out was a long snowmobile journey around the point. But we knew all of this, and we were ready. It was just harder for Joannie.

At the time we were not sure what was going on, but it seemed that Joannie had just come to accept that this was the way things were going to be. She was going to be treated like the pretty waitress, so she decided to play the part, and it seemed to all of us, that she came to relish it.

There was also protection to be assured by being popular and good humored, and Joannie was just that. She knew all of the miners and their tasks and shifts, and would sometimes put something extra when presenting their plates. She knew that I like Chilli and she would always put some sauce on my eggs. And she was always smiling, and had developed a happy banter delivered with a lilting feminine voice.

“Not a waitress, a hostess,” she said. It was like that made us all her guests. And guests are beholden to their host.

Spud was becoming increasingly aggravated by the way things had turned out. I think that there was some sexual frustration there too. We were close to one hundred men when you include the mechanics, electricians, building maintenance, water and wastewater systems, laundry, and the stockpile men who worked above ground. Add to that the cooks and stewards who kept food on the table for several shifts, and who attended to cleaning all the living quarters.

And there was one woman, and she wasn’t actually a woman at all.

Spud started to get very suggestive. This was years back and before a wider acceptance of gay men in a work place like this. Spud may well have been gay, but there were plenty of men who were not who could still see the woman in Joannie. I don’t mind admitting that I was one.

I never made a fool of myself as some did. I never sent her love notes or gave her little gifts. One of the men had fashioned her a new outfit of clothes with a mini-dress made out of a set of new overalls, complete with high-vis strips, complemented with a pair of shoes fashioned from seal skin with walrus tusk high heels. Another gift was a small fossil fashioned into a brooch. BB happily exhibited the gifts she had received without naming the giver. Whether she granted favors in return, none of us knew. Except perhaps, those who might have received them.

She would often say things like - “Only 50 days until you get out and can see the real thing”. It was true that by the time that the end of our term was that close we all knew the number of days, and maybe even counted the hours.

But it seemed like the one person who was not counting was Spud. If he had been why would he have done what he did. He should have known how well Joannie had charmed to men who mattered and not thought to force his intentions the way he did.

Her screaming was just like the screams of a woman. Nobody had to ask – “Who is that, calling out?” We knew it was her. I am not sure how far Spud got with her because I was not one of the first, but I was there to add my blows later on. We were all affronted by what he tried to do.

There was an accident a day or two later. These things happen in mining. After Spud cooled off he was put back to work, but to those around him he was a brute now.

It did not matter how many times that he said – “Who cares about that fucking limp wristed fag, anyway?” Joannie was popular and helpful, and he was not.

Like I said, accidents happen, and sometimes people get what they deserve.

And then time was up, and we were headed back on a flight to Tromso. On the flight with me was Joannie, I say that because while some may have expected Johnny to board that plane, he was nowhere to be seen. The beautiful Joannie sat in the seat in front of me. I could not resist touching her hair while she slept.

I thought that would be my last contact, perhaps my only contact with her. I told others about my plans for the money we all collected, but I was not sure if anybody would follow up. But being in isolation like that does forge some bonds, and in fact when I set about buying my island and renovating the buildings on it, three guys that I had worked with came to help. In return they got free holidays for life, and they have all been back since, some with wives and families.

As for Joannie, we all spoke of her with good-humored favor, as she had helped to light up that time underground in a way that sodium lamps never can. But we never expected to see Johnny, or even to recognize him if we saw him.

And then one day, she walked back into my life. I did not recognize her. I was not there when she checked but I was told that there was a woman from my past down at the pool. I went down there to find out who.

She was wearing dark glasses but she looked like nobody I ever could have known – a supermodel with long hair and breasts filling the top of her bikini, with the bottom part stretched across hips and cupping what looked like the perfect pudenda. He skin was tanned, and her body swayed as she walked. She was, in short, a wet dream on legs - long legs.

“Don’t you recognize me?” she asked, removing her shades to reveal those happy eyes. “Just a couple of things added, and some other things removed, but it is still me.”

Joannie. It was if the long winter had only just ended as she stood there, shining brightly. Despite the Greek sun I was still in winter until she walked back into my life. It was as if my island had only been missing one thing, and that was a hostess. Of course, I could not let her go – not ever.

The End

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