No More Worlds to Conquer

A Short Story being an Alternative Retelling of History

By Maryanne Peters

My father’s name was Pasilidus, and he was a great warrior. He was Macedonian like his general, and had been with Alexander from the very beginning. Even before the conqueror crossed the straits into Asia he crossed the Danube and destroyed the Getae, and my father was there. He marched with his general to Illyria and Taulanti, and was there when Thebes was burnt to the ground. All this needed to be done before Alexander was ready to take on the whole world.

When that day came my father was attached to the young general Hephaestion, who has been at Thebes but not Thracia. Hephaestion was promoted because he was a friend and classmate of Alexander, and much more besides. as became clear. He was a year older than the great emperor, but still several years younger than my father. He recognized the value of my father’s experience and so they became close, but nothing like the closeness between Alexander and Hephaestion.

Macedonians take no issue when it comes to sex between men, especially in armies at war. Men have needs in the their bodies, and there are bodies available. We simply cannot be sentimental about it. That can be bad for morale.

But Alexander loved Hephaestion, and that was clear to all who saw them together. Still, few knew the nature of that love as my father did. He was close to both, although not at the highest level of command.

As for my father, he chose women. It pained him to leave his wife in the spring of the second year of Alexander’s reign [April 334 BCE]. It pained her more perhaps, because she was to die within a year. But he was bound to serve, and in truth, he has a love of war.

He was able to feed his love as they fought their way through Asia Minor, and then to Sidon and Gaza and through to Egypt. My father came to Babylon for the first time, fought at the battle of Gaugamela and at the Persian Gate, and marched into the Persian capital in the winter of the 5th year of Alexander’s reign [January 330 BCE]. From there the unbeaten army Marched East to Pathia, Gandara and Bactria, in pursuit of King Darius. It was there that the Persian king was killed and his body presented to our king as a tribute. It was absolute victory in only a little over four years.

My father said that the mood in the army changed from that time. Some sought to return. My father had learned that his wife was dead so he was not one of those, but he understood. For many it seemed that the purpose of the war was done. Europe was safe from the Persians.

For Alexander the adventure had only begun. Macedon was just a small backwater after all that they had seen and vanquished.

The Indus river and the great Indian Sea lay before them, and it would be another six years before they returned to Susa and to Babylon.

So who was this Alexander the Great, who led what was just a small band of adventurers into the worlds largest continent and laid waste to it all. He was a warrior – fearless and skilled. He was a leader, so that all who knew him would follow. And yet many people and not just my father would describe him as “short in stature and pretty like a girl with light colored hair and big eyes, one blue and one brown”. It was said that he could not grow a beard, so maintained a clean face, and a mass of fair curls on his head. Some would say that he had a fragrance about him, and that his body was also smooth. He affected a rough voice but that was not his natural tone.

His personality was complex. He was extremely intelligence and knowledgeable, but prone to superstition and distrust. And he appeared vain on occasions but on other occasions not. Many said that he was insane, or close to it.

Of this description I cannot comment, for I never met Alexander the man. I only ever met, and I knew and loved, the woman.

My father said that with his tight group some would refer to the king and general as “Hephaestion’s wife”. I explained that my father despised sentimentality, but he came to feel that the sexual relationship between his immediate superior Hephaestion and Alexander was a good thing. As he explained it Hephaestion kept the king sane, by allowing him to cease to be a king while in his arms or in his bed. That calmed but reinvigorated the king.

Who knows how a person with such power and charisma can chose to spend evenings as the submissive wife of one of his generals, but as my father would say: “The mind of man is for understanding but it in itself, beyond all understanding”.

Alexander was by all accounts capable of taking a man’s role in sex, although it was not his preference. He took wives for political reasons, and upon his return from the full extent of his eastern conquests he took a third wife in the mass weddings of his generals to the locals which took place in Susa before the end of his reign [March 324 BCE], but his issue is questioned.

Shortly after the weddings occurred the greatest tragedy of Alexander’s life – the death of Hephaestion. It took place at Ecbatana where as representative of his king Hephaestion was attending games and festivals when he fell ill. Alexander was called to his bedside, and there, with Alexander on one side and my father on the other, Hephaestion died.

It was something that he ate, they said. My father said that his body lay as if alive, so much so that Alexander would not let go until he was lifted from it, and it was wrapped to later be placed in a sarcophagus for burial.

My father said that a local Persian physician told him that the mouth should not be covered and the body not bled for a period of a whole day and a night just in case Hephaestion might have been struck down by the blue flower pepper, which creates a sleep indistinguishable from death. But he really was dead.

Alexander was inconsolable. It was there for everyone to see. He seemed intent of drinking himself to death. It was widely known. So it came as no surprise to those close to him that a year after the death of his closest friend and lover, Alexander the Great also died.

But this is just the beginning of my story, not the end. Because Alexander did not die on that day [June 11 323 BCE]. The legend - “The Great” may have died, but not the person.

As my father explained, all that Alexander wanted was to be a woman and a wife. The prince with the searing ambition was the man he made himself to be. He had the strength of mind to put aside his impossible dream and to replace it with a dream that was also as impossible, but which he achieved – the conquest of the world.

But even that was not enough. It was said that “Alexander wept because there were no more worlds to conquer”. But my father said that he wept because he had done the impossible and conquered the world, but still could not have the one thing he wanted – the body of a woman, and her role in life.

That was when my father, in a private moment when they spoke together about the loss of good Hephaestion, that my father suggested that maybe he could have want he wanted. He said that it would mean sacrificing all that he had won.

Alexander said that without Hephaestion as a husband there would be no point, and my father then said: “I would want to marry you, if you were the woman who loved my lord the way you did.”

He would tell me no more details of that exchange other than to say that some days later this incredible plan was put into effect. My father had sourced the blue flower pepper and that his king did indeed collapse into a sleep indistinguishable from death. After all had confirmed that it was indeed the king and that he was indeed dead, my father arranged for a substitute body of the same size to be consigned for burial while he transported the sleeping king, masked so as not to be recognized, to the Persian surgeon for certain procedures. The sleep of the blue flower pepper slows the blood and even pain will not waken the poisoned victim, so much could be done to rid the king of the sex he was born with.

It was not the body of the king that was placed in the grand sarcophagus filled with honey and then paraded through the streets. There was another inside it for its eventful journey back to Macedon including being hijacked twice. While all of that went on, Sandiya was privately married to my father – the wedding that she had always dreamed of.

Who was Sandiya? She was my mother. Not my natural mother of course. Some things remain impossible, even for her. But it seemed like everything else was, including living the life she always wanted, by dying first.

“What is the use of being the King of the World if you cannot use your power to get what you want?” It was just that Alexander would always be famous not just the most famous man in the world, but the most famous man in all history. And what Sandiya wanted was to be a woman and a wife, and to adopt me and my brother and sister, and to be our mother.

We never doubted that our mother could still conquer the world all over again if that is what she wanted. But as she said: “Why would I want that when I have the love of my husband and my children?” She had that. That was all she really wanted.

The End

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