Sluzhanka

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

They were different times. It was a Russia when it was still a place to do business. In fact, the nation was desperate to do business with the West. It was a nation looking in our direction back then. There was a need to make things better. The Russians had achieved many great things, but as a friend of mine once described it – “Russia is spires of excellence in a third world swamp”.

I am not one to frequent brothels, but I have needs. I was alone on that trip, and somebody had mentioned to me that whores in Moscow were beautiful and cheap. There was also mention of variety. There are so many ethnicities in Russia. I think that my request for somebody exotic may well have shown how poor my proficiency in the Russian language was.

But at first I was not disappointed when she walked into the room assigned to me. She was slim and blond and quite simply the prettiest girl I had seen in the entire city, in all my six visits there. She looked shy and even virginal, as if it was her first time. The effect was more than alluring, it was thrilling.

But the high state of my excitement was set for a crashing disappointment. She quietly removed her clothes to reveal something quite horrific. She first revealed her breasts which were tiny, and then she revealed something else that was not quite as small – a penis.

Of course, my immediate reaction was to go to the door and call for another – but a real woman. But something made me pause. I think that it was the ribs that I could see, and bruises too. Here was somebody who seemed undernourished and abused, and I like to think of myself as kind-hearted.

There was also that beguiling incongruity - the body of a boy barely out of puberty, and the head of a girl with a pretty face and long blond hair. I told “her” to pull her dress back on and tell me about herself. I wanted to know how old she was and how she had ended up in that place.

It turned out that she was only 15 years old, which was under the legal age of consent in Russia. It had been lifted from 14 to 16 only a few years before, in 2003, and it was not well respected. Perhaps if she had been a 15 year old girl I might have had sex with her, but I was not about to have sex with a boy.

She said that she had been sold into service at the bordello. Her parents were penniless, and there was a brother on whom the family had put their hopes, and a sister with a disability who was worth nothing. She did not seem bitter and was perhaps even a little sympathetic. It seemed to me that these were all traits of a good person. She was far too good to be left to this life.

There may be some that would suggest that I was buying her for my own use and abuse, but that was never the case. It is true that I had walked through the streets of Moscow and seen a huge number of deprived people, and many more who had brought deprivation on themselves, and I did nothing to help them. It was just that we had found ourselves together and we had talked, as best as I was able, and after that I could not abandon her.

Before I left that place I went to see the lady in charge of the brothel to ask the price for the release of this poor youth. In those days (it must be the same now) the ruble was worthless, and the official exchange rate was a joke, so a price in US dollars was agreed upon on the spot. All I asked was that she not be put to work until I returned the next day with cash.

It was not a large sum but I had to collect it some of it from American colleagues. Everybody carried a suitable sum in hard currency on their person as “insurance” and I was able to pull it together and go back to collect her. She was packed and ready, but I had to pay a small extra sum “for the cost of the suitcase”. It was not unexpected.

I told her that she was free, but she said that she was not free until she had paid me back. The word she used was “blat”, a Russian word I had heard to mean a sum paid to corrupt officials. She said that the correct usage of it was in relation to obligations – small things can be gifts but larger things carry “blat”. In her case, she said that she owed me her life.

But I was soon to return home. She was having none of it. She would go with me.

I suggested that she cut her hair and wear men’s clothes that I was happy to buy, but she said that she would not do that while she was not free, or at least that was what I understood she was saying. I helped her to apply for a passport, and this was in her male name and the photograph was with her, hair pulled back and no makeup. She still looked like a girl.

So, I brought her back to the US and she was approved with a 90 day visa. She moved in with me, using the spare room in my house.

She wanted to continue dressing as a woman, so I suggested that she use the name Maria. Maria Sharapova had just won the US Open and was the talk of the tennis world. Sharapova was tall like my Maria, but in my view not as beautiful.

Maria said that she would be my “sluzhanka” – a servant of some kind. She would keep house and cook me meals, and I would determine the value of her work and so fix the date when she could be free. Initially I told her that this would be less than 90 days, and I would pay to fly her home. The term of her visa was the guarantee of her freedom.

She said that she would help by going to buy food while I was working, so on the day after she arrived I took her to the supermarket. Her eyes almost popped out of her head. In those days, and maybe still, Russian supermarkets were lanes of empty shelves and had been since from Soviet times. Maria was amazed. For weeks afterwards she just liked to go to the supermarket and look. But when she did buy, she bought with care. She was brought up to avoid waste and extravagance.

Her shopping trips helped her to improve her English too. She read the product labels, sometimes out loud, and she engaged with customers and staff. In those days it was good to say “I am Russian, and I love America”. She was and she did.

She saved money for me and she asked if she could spend money left over on clothes and cosmetics. Of course, I agreed, although it seemed strange that everything she bought was not what I expected. I would have thought that jeans and at least gender-neutral tops would have been useful. In Russia that was not just to wear, as there was a market for second hand clothes if they were from the West.

I think I was assuming that Maria would return to living as a man, but at the same time I was dreading it. She just seemed to be so natural being female, and she was watching TV and picking up the feminine gestures and talk of girls her age, and “performing” them in front of me. She even seemed to be losing her accent when she did so, which was not something I particularly like. Russian can sound hard and guttural, but it also has wonderful sounds which when spoken by a woman, can sound delightful.

But perhaps my real reason for dreading her returning to being male is that for some reason she had tied that to her being released and returning to Russia. I would have denied it then as unnatural, but I know the facts now and the primary one was that I was falling in love with Maria.

I have known love. I was even married for a time – twice in fact. But when I look back at those the relationships were both ones of mutual convenience, accompanied with a fondness that was always bound to fade, if not become something negative. Love is something that I now understand is even stronger than sexuality. If you fall in love with somebody it does not even cross your mind to be concerned about what lies between her thighs, even when you know.

The word “sluzhanka” came to mean something else for me. This was the person who greeted me when I got home to the warm smells of rich home cooking, and who told me about her day filled with wonderful new experiences and listened to my complaints about my own life. She was not there to serve me – sometimes I felt that I was the one who served her. I had given her a life, but that is not what I mean. It was more that my life no longer mattered – her happiness was everything.

The changes in her body in only a few months I am sure were slight, but to me they seemed incredible, when combined with all the other changes. She was becoming a woman, and a confident one. To me she always looked like a woman, but she seemed to be taking on other aspects – swings in mood, contrariness and belligerence. Her improvement in English seemed to make her more inclined to argue with me, even just the sake of it.

It was like having a wife without the benefits. By that I mean sex. Yes, I loved her, and I loved her in spite of her being male. But we had never had a sexual relationship. I told myself that this was impossible, but that was never true. I had found her in a bordello, and while I then thought that she looked innocent and virginal, I had learned since that she was something very different.

I knew that if I told myself that this was a young man, forced to pretend to be female and then remaining like that as a part of some obligation to me that I did not fully understand, I would be lying to myself. Maria had learned that she was nothing as a pale and weak boy, but something special as a beautiful foreign woman.

It was not as if I could keep her, but yet I reminded her that her visa was almost up. I checked the terms and I discovered that if I was to marry her before her visa expired, she could stay. Even if she did not change sex I could marry her by declaring that ours was a gay relationship, meaning that I was gay. It would be a huge thing for me to do that, but I thought that I was prepared to do it, to keep her with me, and to tie herself to me in some way.

But it was not necessary.

She asked to speak with me about her future and I said that it could wait until I got home. But she said that she wanted to discuss it with me at a small bar near my place of work where I had taken her a few times. It had intimate booths where we could talk privately. I did not question why there. I had some options we could discuss.

I was there at the allotted time after work and she was late. She looked stunning when she walked in. She was wearing a knit dress that showed every curve of her developing body. Her hair was up in some kind of lazy twist with a big clip, and with sexy tendrils hanging down Her makeup was special, as if she was expecting to go out on the town.

I stood for her, as a man should when faced with such beauty. I motioned for her to sit opposite, perhaps so I could just soak her in, but she just waved a hand to decline the offer.

“There is no easy way to say this,” she said. “As you have said, my time in America is almost up, so I have to leave. I have packed up while you were at work. I leave tomorrow.”

“You’re going back to Russia?” I could not believe it. It seemed that she was playing some kind of cruel game, which seemed to have a pleasure of hers.

“No, I am going to Germany tomorrow, and I hope to get another visa to come back soon,” she said. “Yevgeny lives in Germany. He can get me in on their relationship visa. That is him standing by the door.”

She pointed to a man who may have entered behind her – I didn’t notice. He was big and powerful looking – the kind of man you should not upset.

I suppose that I had no choice but to surrender. I slumped back down in my seat. I did not cry, but if I had thought it would have made any difference I am ashamed to say I would have. I was just stunned. And she turned and walked away. The last sight I had of her was that perfect bottom in that tight dress.

When I got home I discovered that she had taken all that she had and some of what I had too. I simply wrote it off as my loss. I lost my sluzhanka and more besides, but only one thing of value.

I tell myself always, that I am better off without her. She was not a good person and she cold never love me that I loved her. But no matter how many times I say it, it does not make me any less sad.

The End

2380

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