The News

A Short Story Contribution

By Maryanne Peters

I suppose that I had not much idea about the issues of intersex or transgenderism before Toxically Induced Sexual Morphosis (TISM) hit Ridgewick. Then it became not just the big news in town, but the only news. And the news is my business.

People may make fun of small town newspapers like “The Ridgewick Advertiser”, but I have always taken the role of editor very seriously. It is not a big newspaper but it is produced at a low cost paid for entirely by advertising and delivered to households free of charge, but people need to pick it up and read it – not throw it straight in the trash. That means that it needs material.

We were never in a position to buy external news feeds, so we depended on local stories, and input from readers. I always like to write a topical editorial and invite emails back that I could publish. I even confess that if the response was poor, I might write a letter to myself under an assumed name. I had just one writer on the staff – Gordon Gunter – gifted but often drunk, which meant that he was cheap. I had another couple of freelancers including Leonard Kelway and my daughter Rose who posted a column of sorts “Letter from Chamberlin” keeping us in touch with news from the city.

But the stories that I sought out from Gordon or Leonard, or I wrote myself, were stories about our little community in Ridgewick. What was happening, who was arriving and (more often) who was leaving. Events tended to be few and far between, but “The Ridgewick Advertiser” would be there to cover them – church fairs, a birth of twins, a haystack fire. It doesn’t sound like much.

But then everything changed, and a few people changed to.

They are still talking about how it happened and what is going on inside the bodies of those affected. Some say that I may take years to get all the answers, because only some are affected, and some in very different ways. People have their own theories, and in the absence of all the facts, theories are the news. I had some of my own.

Toxically Induced Sexual Morphosis – the name explains what it is. A poison was inducing changes in the sex of people affected. The origin of the poison is now no secret. We all understood that the big chemical refinery over in Blaxland had been closed down years ago because dangerous chemicals had leaked into the water table. Ridgewick uses bore water and for a while we boiled it. Then they put in UV treatment. But it turns out that neither boiling or UV rays can break down some pharmaceutical compounds, although nobody told us.

It took ages for the induced sexual morphosis to appear. The first impact was intersexed children born to residents of Ridgewick. Incidences of truly intersexed babies happen everywhere, but they are very rare – just a fraction of 1%. There are a bunch of other “intersex conditions” that are said to lift the number to 1.7%, but in Ridgewick we have had close to 20% of boys who were declared to be girls when they were born. Then the chemical company was forced to pay for chromosome checks on all children born in Ridgewick and other towns using the groundwater.

Apparently, people have known for years that the herbicide Atrazine causes feminization in frogs, but nobody cared – why should they. The Blaxland plant was looking at an improved version of that compound. They closed down not because of the leakage but because of affected workers. It is something that I have been working on, but the company settled with gagging orders, so I have little to go on.

The company knew that widespread ingestion of the compound meant financial ruin, so they settled internal claims and quietly declared in bankruptcy. Some in management have even fled the country.

I published a story which I called “The Third Sex” speaking about the children. All the parents of affected children – all boys – decided that they would be raised as girls. I spoke about the need for understanding, and for our community to accept these children were girls, even if they presented a chromosomal abnormality. I opened a frank discussion about the future difficulties they would face, in particular in not be able to create and bear children. What was needed was understanding, and for the town to rally around in support of those families.

Once the water was shown to be the problem we used groundwater only for washing, and that was supposed to be an end of it. It was in terms of intersex births, but then the transfems started to appear.

“Transfems” is not my word, but it is better than other words that can be used to describe the boys affected. People can be unkind. I was ready to include these as being late arrivals to “The Third Sex”, but it is much more complicated than that. Boys who have been born as girls will always be girls, but I am talking about boys who appear to be boys and are raised as that, only to reach puberty and suddenly become girls.

Puberty is a strange thing, when you think about it. In the womb the embryo starts out as gender neutral but the chromosomal makeup directs the small changes needed to see a boy born with a penis and a girl with a vagina. But those things count for little until a child reaches an age when anatomy gets real, and then the differences between the sexes become a canyon – boys on one side and girls on the other.

We all know something about transgender people. Transwomen is the name we give to people born male but who identify as female, and always have done. Does that apply to the transfems of Ridgewick? Here we are talking about boys who suddenly find their bodies changing and who, in the vast majority, chose to follow their form into a new gender. These are people who have become transgender.

Some of these kids claimed that they were not happy to become women, but in most cases that seems to be more driven by parental expectation than by their own thoughts. There are also psychologists who insist that gender is a social construct and cannot be affected by chemistry, but it would seem that the transfems of Ridgewick prove them wrong. At least I think so.

I know that Reverend Daniels of “The League of Christian Decency” and others believe that these young people are making a choice, and that they can be persuaded against it by threats of damnation or by prayers for God to intervene and direct them. But it seems to me that this cannot be called voluntary. There is a poison at work here, and they have been changed by it. How can we condemn them for what is beyond their control even if it might be their choice as to how to deal with it.

Ridgewick is a small town so we all know somebody affected by it. Some say that it was again close to another 20% of prepubescent boys became post pubescent transwomen, seeking in time, to fully transition to young women through surgery and hormone replacement therapy.

Obviously, people like Coach Phillips were ready to bemoan the fact that Ridgewick was now a town short of young men. He would call the young women with XY chromosomes “half-girls” and the boys changing before his eyes “half-boys” or “queer boys”, but that serves no purpose. We had faced a scourge, and we had come through it. At least all those in Ridgewick were healthy, unlike some in some neighboring towns.

We thought we were done with it at that point. Some affected in utero, and some prior to puberty. Now it was over. We had other water sources and we could deal with the fact that a larger number of our local youth were, for all intents and purposes, female. Beauty salons and clothing stores were booming, and people were coming up from Chamberlin with their daughters to access fashion things.

But then the toxin claimed yet more victims. It was 15 years after the spill and ten years after the groundwater was condemned for drinking. It seemed like everybody affected was in high school or just out of it, and then we had our first case of TISM in an adult.

Wesley Nevin was the son of old man Nevin who ran the diner on the road in from Chamberlin. He had been a high school jock – popular but not smart – somebody his redneck father was proud of. He sold insurance and seemed to be doing well. He married one of the prettiest girls in his high school year and they had two sons who were unaffected by TISM. It seemed like a regular family, and then Wesley started growing breasts.

He hid it for a while, but he did seek treatment and blood tests revealed the presence of the toxin in very high levels. It only became public when Wesley decided to make a public announcement that he was “a mature victim of TISM”. He contacted me as a person who could tell his story in a sympathetic way.

I knew him well enough, so I was surprised when I went to his home and he came to the door wearing one of his wife’s dresses. He explained that, just like the transfems he was developing feminine feelings as well as taking on female sexual characteristics – feelings that he did not feel that he could fight. His wife was distraught but trying to understand. His sons were just confused, and being of that pre-teen age, becoming concerned that they might end up as girls.

I published my story, and it caused an uproar. Some were supportive of Wendy Nevin, although his father was horrified as were some of her sporting pals. I had exhorted understanding, and a warning about the groundwater.

Of course, there were some that suggested that Wendy had been drinking the groundwater on purpose. It was known that some local was bottling “Ridgewick Water” and selling it out of state, where transgender people were buying it to assist in their transition. It seemed unlikely, but not impossible. But then there were three others cases including my own freelance reporter Leonard now Leonora (Nora) Kelway. I encouraged Nora to tell her story by Diary instalments in “The Advertiser” and they made for good reading.

Even then, we had medical experts come forward to say that this “late onset TISM” was an impossibility and that it seemed more likely that all four people affected were transgender all along. It is always hard to argue with science, and so I had to give this explanation some support.

But the problem for me has become a little personal. You see, I am 51 whereas the oldest person affected by TISM up until now has been Wendy Nevin not yet 40. And I have recently notices some swelling around my nipples and a sudden attraction to women’s clothing.

The End

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