Waif

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I chose to live in Paris because to me it is the best city in the world, even if I cannot fully enjoy it. I choose to live three floors up because I want to be above the street but still feel a part of what goes on down there, even though it does create problems for my mobility. The small lift, so typical in Paris, is too small for my wheelchair, so I am largely confined to my apartment. But I live in the heart of Paris.

My apartment is wonderful. It has everything I want, and I can move about it easily. People would call it opulent, but I cannot allow it to be cluttered. That would inhibit my movement. Pictures of my life in high fashion adorn the walls, and classic garments still fill the closets. I have a sunny sewing room, which is just a hobby for me. There was a time when 30 machinists were busy making my clothes under my direction. God knows how many there are now, and in which third world country they might be.

But it is no longer my company – my fashion house. I just receive my royalty. It is much more than I will ever need, but it is my tangible reward for the life that I led, and the sacrifices I made. One of those sacrifices was learning to deal with loneliness.

People who are not determined will never succeed, and people who are determined can overcome any emotion. I did not even the loss of the use of my legs to throw me into depression. I have my beautiful things – my garments, my art, music, and I live in Paris - the best city in the world.

But then I was blessed with the waif. In French we say *galopin*, but waif is one of the nicer English words, or so I think.

As the song goes, she came in through the bathroom window. Not a she then – still very much a child, only 12, with her sex not fully determined. She had escaped, as I think we can call it, from l’Orphelinat d’Saint Jerome quite near to my home, and fled across the roof tops and down the sewer pipes to my open window.

She was dirty and tired from her adventures. I reassured her that she had a safe refuge with me.

I was never really fond of children. There was no mother instinct in me, it seemed. So it was not that which made me welcome the child. I believe that I saw in her a spirit for adventure that was still unfulfilled in me. And now, without the use of my legs, it seemed somehow that the spirit in her was something that I could try to draw from.

She needed to bathe, and perhaps because bathing at the institution was communal, she seemed unashamed to let me see her naked body. I did not find the presence of a penis offensive – I had taken much joy from those things in my past, just ill-suited.

I disposed of the clothes down the rubbish chute. I then had to explain to her, as she stood naked and pale and smelling of Roger & Gallet soap, that the only clothes that I had in the place were women’s clothes, but what clothes they were!

She laughed, and I had such a feeling of warmth, it was like the family I never really, just her and me.

She was dark. I suspect there was Arab in her. But there was also the green eyes and small nose that hinted of other parentage. I wondered if she might be the child of some poor young Muslim girl made pregnant by a good-looking European man and abandoned in shame.

Because it was just the two of us, she was unperturbed by having to wear clothes that she then considered inappropriate. The sizes were wrong, but I had my sewing machine, and it was just a question of small modifications.

But she needed her own modifications, and very early on I decided how I should effect those. It was vanity I suppose that had me take steps to delay menopause. After the accident I did not throw away the HRT tablets, and I continued get a prescription for them and the patches that replaced them. I had a huge supply. The pills were easily ground down and mixed with her morning fruit juice.

I introduced her to my daily helper as a niece Virginie, come to stay for a while. Angelique, my helper was from Senegal, strong enough to lift me out of bed and assist me with my toilet every morning. She seemed glad that I had company.

I always spoke to Virginie in the feminine. English speakers will not understand that when I say: “my dear” in English it could be to either sex, but I always addressed her as “*ma Cherie*”. In French you have to choose gender, so I did. She did not mind. It was then just our private thing.

It was not long before she was ready to go out, and even with the search for “the lost boy” still going on, she felt totally secure in a dress, with her dark hair arranged by my our hand, in some soft curls with a jewelled clip. I said she could buy some shoes, as it took a while before she could wear mine.

I do love shoes so. Now that I no longer walk in them, I just wear them for decoration, and somehow that makes them almost more important. I wanted Virginie to share my love for such things, as she came to over time.

She would always come back to the apartment with stories of where she had been and what she had seen. She would say: “If only you could have been there and seen it”. But then she would see me and be suddenly sad, which is not something I liked to see. I despise pity.

She found the “Gopro” camera among some of my belongings. I think that I may have used it at a fashion show or two, prior to the accident. Virginie said that she could take it outside and send me live video of her activities, with audio as well. I could watch it on my tablet that stayed with me constantly.

Wearing it on a headband looked simply awful. I was very particular that anybody leaving my home should be dressed properly. I was able to fashion pockets in her tops for the camera so that it faced forward and did not seem obvious. But the Gopro was chunky and in time was replaced by something much smaller. There is so much technology out there.

I have to say that the wearable camera changed my life, but more so Virginie’s. For me it gave me the ability to walk the streets of Paris again without leaving my wheelchair or my apartment. For her it allowed her to become me walking those streets, now as a young woman, but with all the knowledge I had.

I had her in contact with me the entire time, you see. She had an earpiece, and there was a microphone in the camera. I could see what she saw, and hear what she heard, and she could hear me, and nobody else could.

Initially I was guilty of being over-controlling. I wanted to go where I wanted to go. But then I learned that letting her loose with her youthful exuberance was refreshing and exciting. If she wanted to simply play with a stray cat or use a swing, I had to remind myself that she was still a child, even though she no longer appeared to be one.

The hormones had taken a grip on her early, and she was entering into a girl’s puberty. Her growth slowed. She would never be very tall. Her breasts started to appear. Whatever hardness there may have been in her appearance, disappeared. She was becoming very pretty.

She was fearful of the changes. But I was there to comfort and reassure her. It was not something that I had any real skill in doing, but somehow for Virginie it came naturally to me. I think that is love. To be so close to somebody that all barriers you build around yourself to ensure your success in life, just fall away when you are hugging one another.

I think that it was only a relatively short time before she became accepting, with the realization that she was turning into a beautiful young woman, and that is a good thing to be. Especially in Paris, or so I would say.

By the time she was 15 she was turning heads in the street. I am not being conceited in telling you that it was in large part due to what she learned from me. You could say that I “home-schooled” her, but I taught her what a woman really needs to know. To be successful a woman needs to be able to impress with her mind as well as her appearance and that means reading widely and reading for information rather than entertainment. Ideas are important, so she needed to understand a variety of them. With knowledge of ideas you can converse with anybody.

But the body is important. I am not talking about the naked body. That has its own attractions, although there was a thing of ugliness between her legs still. No, the body should be clothed to be truly expressive, and clothed well. That is something that I know very well indeed. Then it needs to be presented to the world with style. “Style” is perhaps and over-used word in the fashion industry, but I mean it refer to a complete look, and to actions. I taught Virginie to walk the streets of Paris as if she owned them. There is nothing more attractive in a woman than confidence.

My apartment was close to the shopping areas of the Rue Beauborg and the Rue de Rivoli, and we loved to walk those areas. She became a familiar face but I told her to save her greetings for just a few useful people: the *fromagier*, the *pâtissier*, the *chocolatier*. Save your smile so that when it appears it is like sunshine through a raincloud. People will adore you for it. I should know.

Our neighborhood is special, but I longed to get back to the Avenue Montaigne and the high-end shops where my old business still traded. I wanted her to walk in there and own it, just as she now owned the square kilometer around our apartment.

She did just that. She walked the racks with the trained eye I had taught her. She had the camera on a pendant and held it so that I could look at the labels and the detail. I was appalled. How had my life’s work fallen so low?

I had her tell them so. I gave her the words myself through to her ear and she delivered them. The lady in charge bust into tears. I told her that now was the time to leave, with her nose in the air. But Virginie put her arm around the woman and assured her that as manageress she was not responsible for the stock she was given. It was a weakness in her, but kindness should always be forgiven, I suppose.

When she was outside, she pulled out her phone to talk to me. She only used it as a prop so that she did not appear to be talking to herself when she spoke to me. She told me that she felt used. Of course that was true. She was my eyes and ears in the City of Lights, and my legs.

I apologized for how harsh I had been, and she understood my extreme disappointment at what we had both seen: Made in China, with poor stitching and poor attention to detail. But as she put it, I had sold the business years ago and made a fortune, so why did I care so much? That is the difference between us.

But as a treat I had her use the bankcard to buy some pretty things at exorbitant prices, and then relax with a pastry at an expensive café on the best shopping street in Paris.

A man approached her and asked whether he could take a vacant seat. She followed my first rule – ignore any man unless he has been introduced properly. But he sat down. I see only what she sees, but not her. That is the weakness in our arrangement. What look had she given him?

He admitted that he had been following her. He said that he was fascinated by her. I told her to what to do, but it was me she ignored.

There was a time, maybe forty years ago, when I would have let a man like this take me to bed. He would need to prove his ardor with some gifts and a meal, but if he had done it that day, I would have let him take his moment of joy. But it would only be a moment – one that he would remember for the rest of his life. When I was in my twenties, I would have done that.

Probably in my forties too. He was very good-looking. Maybe even my fifties. God, even now.

Watching this unfold before my eyes was like watching a plane crashing into a mountain from the seat behind the pilot - through gritted teeth shouting: “Pull up. Pull up”, but somehow being exhilarated by thrill. But there would be a crash. How could there not be.

He invited her to dine with him. I forbade it. She pulled the earpiece out.

I could not pull myself away. I had to watch. She could have put the camera in her bag. She wanted me to see. She wanted me to hear her giggling like the child she was. Despite all I had taught her about how to be a sophisticated woman, she was a child. A silly little girl, flirting with a man.

In France 15 is the age of consent, but then we do not have an age below which the absence of consent is presumed. It is a failing. Sometimes I think it should be 30. Women are stupid until they achieve some real knowledge of the world, and that comes with experience.

And so much harder if you are a woman unfortunate enough to have a penis.

I barely even thought of that as I watched. I was just hoping that she would recover her senses for long enough to rebuff his advances before it got too late. But what she was going through was not unknown to me. Although it is so long ago, I remember infatuation. I understand the loss of reason.

Still I kept watching as she pampered her at the restaurant. He talked about himself, as men always do. She laughed at his bad jokes, as lesser women do. I was calling out to her, but the earpiece was gone. I could just see him, staring at her with eyes like the ones I had looked into, so long ago.

I could almost smell him. I am not talking about aftershave or what men call it, I am talking about the smell of a man in heat. The pendant camera bounced against his chest and I could hear the sound. They were kissing. They were outside the restaurant on a warm Parisian night, in one another’s arms.

I heard him explain how he lived nearby. I shouted at my tablet. I nearly threw it across the room. But I was trapped. It was a frustration that I knew only too well.

His apartment was quite good by the standards of our city. He was a man with means, that was clear, but not good enough for Virginie. She could achieve so much if she had followed my direction. But she had proved too wilful.

There it was. His bedroom. It seemed that she was intent on leaving the pendant around her neck even while she took her clothes off. Not that there was much to see as it was crushed between his naked chest and her now quite large young breasts.

It was only when she pushed him away to pull down her panties that I could see him standing there. I could see the look of victory in his eyes. He had charmed this young nymph in an afternoon; he had dined her and would now bed her. Then I saw that look change to one of horror, then one of anger.

Then I watched as this man strangled the life out of my Virginie. As I had watched this plane crashing the whole day, I saw the impact and the ball of fire in his face as he killed the waif who had given my life meaning.

I never even knew the name of the waif. I took no notice of his name or where he lived. I was trapped, you see. I still am.

The End

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