The Claimant

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

He suggested that they meet at a coffee bar at an hour that was not busy. He wanted their discussion to be “off the record” as he said it. She was intrigued more than worried. It seemed that everything had gone to plan. She was about to start life anew, as a very wealthy young woman.

He was very polite. He rose when she approached the very private table in the corner. He waited for her to take a seat. He signaled for service and ordered her what she wanted – a large chai latte – a lady’s beverage. He had a double espresso – a foreigner’s coffee.

“I wanted to meet you here because I have something to say to you in a personal capacity,” he began. “I am not here in my capacity as investigator for the attorneys to the Pullman Estate, but to put a proposal to you … a private proposal.”

“I am listening,” she said. There was a new confidence about her. A confidence that comes from having money, as she soon would, just as planned. But it was all about to come crashing down.

“You see, I have done some research. That is what I do. I am very good at it. Clearly when somebody comes forward claiming to be the long-lost daughter of Mrs. Pullman, we have to look into it. It was all the more difficult given that the daughter was adopted, so that DNA would be the simple determining factor. That fact made it more like some of the claimant cases of times past, such as the case of ‘the Tichborne Claimant’. Have you heard of it?”

“No,” she said. She was trying to conceal her inner distress, and felt that she was succeeding.

“Well, it was an old British case in the 1870’s. A claim to a peerage. A man from Australia convinced the widow that he was her son. But he was found out.”

“But my mother’s estate has been before the court,” she said, now in some barely restrained anger. “I am Rebecca Pullman. Everybody accepts that. There are the photographs of me in my childhood. My knowledge of the house and everybody that my family knew.”

“And your right to the family fortune has been established - I know that. It has not been tested in Court, just rubber stamped. The court could reopen things if some new evidence was produced.” He produced from a briefcase below the table a sheaf of papers in a file and placed it deliberately on the table.

“I think that this meeting should end right now,” she said. She reached for her handbag with a manicured hand.

“Perhaps look at this material before it does,” he said. “Or listen just a few minutes longer.

She let go of her bag. She glared at him, but sat back.

“Yours is a fascinating story,” he said. “I was wondering who you might be. You know this family intimately, that is very clear. And you had to have access to Mrs. Pullman in her last weeks and months at least, and she was very reclusive at that time. There was only the maid, Mrs. Carr, who had been with her for years. Mrs. Carr who was more than just a maid at the end, wasn’t she? But she was completely left out of the Will. The rich can be cruel, can’t they?”

“It was Mother’s money. She could do what she liked with it. She put family first.”

“Family, that’s right. There are the ties of family. That is what I thought. Did Mrs. Carr have a family who might make a claim? That is what I wondered. I looked into her. Maybe she had a daughter? Then I discovered that she didn’t. She only had a son. There are pictures of him in the file here. You could look if you like, but I a sure that you have already seen them … because they are pictures of you.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” she said. “Of course, I know Belinda Carr. She worked for my mother before I left.”

“Yes. Before you went missing.” He was admiring her perseverance.

“I may have seen photographs of her son. I don’t think that I am in any of them. I don’t even remember him. Should I have?”

“It seems incredible to me that you would go to such effort to pretend to be the heiress. I mean a little plastic surgery perhaps – but a sex change!”

“It seems unlikely to be true because it is not true,” she said leaning forward. “I am Rebecca Pullman. Nobody would be believe such an outrageous claim.”

“I didn’t either. But I said that DNA was no use in this case and it turns out that not correct. I managed to get a sample from you. It cannot prove or disprove that you of her family, but it certainly proves that you are not of her sex.”

She sat back stunned for a moment, but then she began to process things – to search for a way out.

“Have you heard of androgen incendivity?” she said. “You have uncovered a secret. I may have male DNA but I have always been what I appear to be on the outside – a woman. I was adopted without this fact being known. The only other alternative is to believe that I was not only changed into a woman but surgically altered to be a doppelganger of her daughter. How realistic is that?”

“Or the photographs were swapped out?” he said. “Your face, adjusted for age, placed in every photograph of Rebecca Pullman in the house. You can do incredible things with photos these days. Reproduce copies of old photos and even fade the changes, but they always have to be printed o new paper. I had them checked. The report is in the file. Read it if you like.

“This is crazy,” she said through gritted teeth. It was a public place and she now understood why. She moved to calm herself before she said – “What do you want from me?”

“I want a reason to destroy this file,” he said. “I want a reason to say that it never existed.”

“The whole thing was my mother’s Idea,” she said. “Do you think that I could have gone this far without her? Do you think I would have?”

“How far have you gone?” he said. “I am just curious.”

“Surgery. Brow nose and chin reduction, and breast implants. Hormones – they have had a massive effect. I mean – look at me.”

He was looking. To him she looked beautiful. Her big eyes were fierce with a little anger and frustration. Her hair looked perfect, her make up too. And the breasts she spoke of heaved in her low cut dress – not huge – just the right size.

“No other surgery?” he asked.

“I have gone far enough. Why would anyone subject me to a gynecological examination? Not that we could afford it. Please believe me, she has spent all of her money, Mom has. We have nothing. I get by on credit I can obtain as Rebecca Pullman and I smuggle something to her, but we are done for if we don’t pull something out of this. You said that she was a maid and more than just a maid at the end? Well, that was right. She did everything for that bitch. And what did she get? Not one nickel. That is what drove this. Everything was going to charities if her daughter could not be found within twelve months of her death. We would happily give the lion’s share to the same charities, once she gets her bit.”

“And you get yours?” It seemed more question than accusation.

“I have done my share. She dragged me home and told me her plan. Ever since then I have been Rebecca Pullman every hour of the day and every day of the week for the past year. I learned everything about her. I learned how to be her. It started with the look and the three weeks at “transgender finishing school” but after that I have lived and breathed and sweated and slept as Rebecca Pullman. Now I am wondering how I will ever be able to go back.”

“Why would you? You are young and rich and beautiful.” He looked her squarely in the eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, sincerely.

“I said that I had a proposal,” he said. “I said that my file could disappear. Nobody need know. Distribution of the estate is only a week away. Your scheme will have worked – totally. I just wanted my cut. I was going to ask for sixty percent, but I would have been talked down to 50%. Now I am wondering how we both might get 100%, less whatever it takes to buy off you mother, Mrs. Belinda Carr.”

“She might have a price to be bought off, but it would be fairly high. But how is it possible that two people can get 100%.”

“Rebecca, if I can call you that, I have secret to reveal,” he said, leaning forward as if to whisper.

“I am listening,” said Rebecca.

“I have always been fascinated by women who were once men. Don’t think me too weird. It is just that it seems to me that they have the best features of both sexes, provided that they are as attractive as you are. Now I find myself talking with somebody who is fascinating in their own right. Somebody who is clearly intelligent but also quick and resourceful. That is the kind of woman I find myself very attracted to … and I mean very.”

“How interesting,” she said with a sly smile. “Are your proposing a partnership?”

“One on many levels,” he replied.

The End

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