Border Crosser

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

***San Francisco SF Weekly Wednesday, Nov 26 2008***

*“Trans-Latina migrants are slowly discovering the asylum option in San Francisco and California. A steady stream of transgender applicants has been showing up in what immigration attorneys say are open-minded asylum offices and immigration courts that have become acquainted with gender-identity–based claims.*

*“Exact numbers of how many transgender women have gotten asylum are hard to come by since the government doesn't track the reason for awarding asylum status. Yet such cases almost seem like a sure thing because of the severity of the alleged discrimination. "You almost gotta try to lose it," attorney Robert Jobe says. In fact, none of the 12 immigration attorneys interviewed for this story could remember any trans clients being denied some sort of protection. Even if applicants can't get asylum, they may still be eligible to stay via other international treaties that offer haven from persecution. And, as many trans-Latina prostitutes have learned, even a lengthy rap sheet in this country won't seriously threaten their chances of receiving protected immigration status.*

*“Hedi Framm-Anton, an immigration attorney who specializes in LGBT asylum cases, boasts that all of her approximately 75 trans clients have won some sort of protection. "If you really have a committed client that wants to make that change [to stop hooking], the San Francisco asylum office will overlook it," she says. "I've had no problems, even with women with extensive criminal backgrounds."*

It was 2008 and the prospect of returning to Mexico terrified me. I had been involved in the drug business moving between Mexicali and Los Angeles, but I had found life easy in the United States and I wanted out of the stresses of crime. Things were getting deadly. In April there was the gun battle in Tijuana, then the Sinaloa crackdown in May, and the shootout in Culiacan. Senior policemen were being assassinated. There was no law south of the border.

I had decided to sever contact with my family, for their protection. Their best chance was to be able to say truthfully that they had no idea how to reach me. They might still be killed, but at least they were not certain of being killed.

The drug trade is driven by controlling people. At the lower levels it is done by addiction, and above that by money, but when you are not addicted and have money, control is exerted by the threat of death – your death or the death of others that you love. I learned early that the defense is to not have anybody to love. Be distant from your family. Avoid meaningful relationships. Use women for sex but never fall in love. Sad perhaps, but unselfish.

November 2008 marked the end of the second administration of George W. Bush as president. He was deporting illegal immigrants. I decided that I would disappear and live upstate and the opportunity to do so fell dead on my floor.

Miles Landry may have been described as one of our dealers, but the truth of it is that I am not sure that he ever sold drugs, although he bought plenty. He appeared to be rich. He consumed drugs ravenously and gave them away to his so-called friends. In the end they would kill him.

Because he died in my house, I decided that the best thing to do was to dispose of the body and have him stay alive. He would travel from time to time, and it was easy enough to create a trail confirming his departure from LA and his movements outside the city. But when I discovered that he had a vineyard in Sonoma it seemed that I had found a way to transfer my wealth.

I already had an identity from a low-level operator within my network closer to my age and appearance, also a victim of that business. Miles was old and had been pursuing film production in LA. It turned out that he had no money. After his disappearance I used some of my accumulated cash to settle debts and take control of his empty accounts, including his vineyard and modest wine importing business.

I then headed north to take over management of his businesses up there as his delegated representative. And it was while I passed through San Francisco that was when I heard about what had been done for Latina transgender sex workers there.

In the election of 2008, just after Barack Obama won the election, the US Federal Court of the Ninth District ordered that “transgender identity” was legally sufficient to claim asylum from persecution in a home country that was less tolerant of gender issues, including Mexico. What was more, there were plenty who had succeeded in avoiding deportation.

The only problem was that I was not transgendered. That and I had only a few weeks to get in and claim my status if I was.

I had little understanding of what transgender meant, other that it involved (as I thought) men dressed as women who wanted to have their cocks cut off. That was something I was not prepared to do, but just about anything short of that seemed worthy at least of consideration.

To escape the drug trade and disappear I hoped that I could use the vineyard and improve upon the wine importing business by importing wine from Spain, Chile and Argentina. But I was still an illegal immigrant and had crossed the border illegally. It seemed to me that the “Trans-Latina migrants” had found a way to avoid deportation. I needed to find out how I could take advantage of this.

I had never met any kind of trans person before, although I knew what they were. But the moment that I said: “I think I might be trans” they opened their arms to me.

Never for a minute did I think that this would be too difficult for me, especially with their help. So I decided that I would take the time to become a transgender person and to make an asylum application.

“But you are not overtly trans,” they all said to me. “You are not at risk like we are”.

“I just do a very good job of pretending to be male,” I said. “But I cannot live a moment longer in this lie!” I had picked up all of this from only one evening with my new friends.

They said that they needed to get me out of those clothes without delay. I could not visit the immigration attorney looking like a man. And the application would need to go through over weeks and maybe months. I would need to join them on their journey to womanhood.

There may have been a pause, but the stakes were high. It was life in curls and frills, or death. And to be honest, they were all so nice, and so full of life. The vineyard could function without me for a few weeks, and I could work the business remotely by staying in touch with the manager in place. I needed to set aside some time to find a way to survive. And I decided that I would have a little fun doing it.

You can think that things like the electrolysis and the hormones were a step too far, but what you would not understand is that these were things that everybody was doing and doing it enthusiastically. How could I be one of them if I was not doing it?

As for the body padding, the dresses and the makeup, that was something of a joke for me. It may not have been funny to them, but the joy of dressing up made everybody smile.

I was fortunate to have a fine head of dark hair. It was naturally a bit curly so when it was straightened it was quite long and I did not need to wear a wig. I just needed the right haircut, and I had plenty of advisers and stylists on hand.

I adopted the name Consuela, or Connie for short. I took a small apartment near to my new friends. I told them that I did not need to hook because I worked from home doing data entry, but I could always find time to get together with “the Girls” in the afternoon for coffee before business started, and to catch up with them at the clubs or bars where our community would gather in the evenings.

I had visited the immigration attorney on my first day fully dressed, but I knew I would have to sit out a period as a Trans-Latina. And if I was to do that, where better to do it than among all the other Trans-Latinas.

How can you not be affected by such total immersion in the culture. The only thing that made me different was that I was not a sex worker, and as some of them said: “Connie is a classy lady”. It was true that I was educated and came from a good family. I went into the drug trade out of greed rather than necessity. So, I did not have to dress to advertise like my new friends, but I did not want to look out place among them. So, I guess I found my own style. One of the girls, but not for sale.

I had money, but I did not want to flash it about. I was living a modest life – just another transwoman in the big city, trying to make it work. I would shop with my friends, but I would buy somewhere else, and avoid labels that revealed the higher cost.

It is a struggle, especially if you are obviously trans. Some of my friends were so feminine in their souls that I came to understand that they were truly women, but they had heavy features and large bodies that would always betray the sex they were born with. You cannot pity them for this – that is the last thing they want. What they want is to be treated like what they are – women. I wanted to be treated like that too, because I was one of them.

It was bound to confuse me. You live a life with others like you, and you become like them. It was only a couple of months, but this life became so real.

I remember when the hormones hit home. Somebody had recommended to all of us that we stop passing around pills and get a slow release capsule. Oral hormones partly pass through the digestive tract and are partly filtered by the liver at some cost to that organ. Slow release is healthier and more impactful. Of course, I had to be as keen as they were. But then I found myself in the shower cupping my breasts and feeling that this was out of control.

Somebody said: “Those breasts of yours are perfect. So well-shaped. You must be so happy.”

I felt strangely proud. I went out and bought a new bra. I wore my usual one out with falsies inside, but I had a smaller one to wear around the house, with my small natural breasts inside, gradually filling the B cups.

The other effect of the hormone was the tears. I had seen some horrors in the drug business. I had lost people close to me. I learned to be made of iron. I never cried. I could clamp my jaw shut and hold my emotions so that nobody could see my turmoil.

Now a little thing could start the tears flowing. Even a movie. Not even a sad one. When it first happened it struck me as a relief. I wanted to leave that trade behind me and to do that maybe I needed to also leave behind the person it had turned me into. Now that seemed possible. Tears washed him away.

Still I thought that my future was as a man – a very different man perhaps, but a man.

I was pursuing an immigration status. That was my objective. But then when it came through it seemed that it was not over for Connie.

“Your asylum status is approved,” my immigration attorney announced with satisfaction worthy of a large fee. “But be on the lookout for ICE inspectors.” In those days that was the body that became ICE, but they pursued illegals just as vigorously. I had my green card but it was in Consuela’s name with sex shown as male “pending proof of SRS surgery”.

I went back to Sonoma to supervise pruning the vines, but I knew that I could not drop my new identity. I reasoned that I might be the subject of a visit from the inspector, but looking back I understand that it was just the fact that I had become strangely comfortable in this new personality.

The staff were aware that I was going into the city to explore a asylum status based on gender, but I am not sure whether they were ready for the woman who stepped out of the rental. I guess that I could have worn gender neutral clothes, but I just chose an outfit and packed the rest. It was an early spring dress that paired nicely with a jacket, and it was comfortable for the 90 minute drive north.

My vineyard manager Keith was there as I stepped out of the car and put on my jacket against the cool breeze and slung my bag over my shoulder.

“Is that you, Boss?” he asked in amazement. He and I worked well together since I had taken over running the business and recapitalized it in the absence of Miles.

I had to smile. I pulled out my green card and held it up in my manicured hand. I said in the feminine voice I had developed over the past three months: “What a guy has to do to get one of these!”

“Well done,” he said. But I could see him eyeing me up and down. It was not the first time I had been looked at that way, but only since I had started living this life. In some ways it annoyed me, but in other ways I liked it. Still, I decided it would be pants around the vineyard and the winery. But with hair up and a little makeup, just in case.

You might say that I should have felt able to relax at home, and forget the disguise, but the truth is that I was relaxed. I seemed relaxed as Consuela. The person I was before was tense and fearful. If it was not the ICE it was the cartel. Now it seemed that I was under threat from neither as long as I was her. I did try it once, dressing in something purely male, but I felt uncomfortable. I preferred feminine blouses and embroidered jeans – I don’t really know why. I could only wear my nightie to bed, or my pink silk robe before dressing for the day or getting ready for bed.

During the day I lived as her and I did business as her. And it seemed like business was picking up. I am not talking about the wine we sold at the cellar door which was always for cash, with no reduction in our stock. We “sold” more wine at the door than any other winery in the valley, but it would take a long time to launder what I had stashed away. But it was the importing business that was increasing – a legitimate business. It seemed sensible that I warehouse in San Francisco, not just because goods were landed there and the market was there, but because I needed space.

And I had a hankering to see my friends again. One of them was going in for surgery – the big one - and she wanted me to be there for her. I realized that when I had spent my time in that community, I had relaxed my rules. I had allowed people to get close to me and I had got close to them. I wanted that.

When I returned to the city I told the girls that I had a new job working for a wine importer and that I would be setting up a warehouse. I started work on that, but then I sat through the final appointments for my friend in her prelude to her operation.

I have to say that if only a few months before you had described the procedure that was explained to us both, I would have felt very uncomfortable. But now I was not pretending in my fascination with the whole thing, and in particular the measures that would be taken to ensure that the man-made organs would maintain sexual sensation. My friend could not wait to have her first female orgasm, but the surgeon warned her that this would take time.

Is it strange that I should share my friend’s excitement, even to the extent of being a little jealous that she was about to achieve the dream of a lifetime? It made me wonder what my dream might be. For her this surgery would be a fulfilment. It was not that she believed that everything that followed would be easy (she was smarter than that) but it would be a life to be lived rather than one to be endured.

I was confused but shared in her happiness. It made me want to stay with her through the surgery and to be with her when she awoke after surgery.

“It hurts,” she said. “But you don’t know how good it feels to say that I have a sore vagina!”

She said that she would love to be with me when my time came, to return the favor. I thanked and assured her that she would. It was not a lie. I just never believed that time would come.

I offered her a job. Somehow it seemed wrong that a vagina that had been created with such care to give such joy to her, should be used by some unloving stranger for a moment of pleasure, and then used by another and another, without any understanding. It should be saved for somebody special. She had a healing process and then a search for love. That could not be pursued on the streets.

And the fact is that I had found a place for the business. It was a three-floor warehouse near the docks with the top level available for conversion into a bay-view apartment for me. I would need help handling inventory. And she could deal with customers with her much increased confidence in presenting as a woman. Plus, she could drive a forklift.

I held a business opening party. I invited all the girls (my Trans-Latina friends), plus customers and locals. To be honest I did not know many of the people who walked in and sampled some of our wines. Certainly I had never met Simeon before, but I was strangely drawn to him.

I saw him across the room, tall, confident and good looking. He looked slightly familiar, and perhaps therefore easy to speak to. But it was him who saw me looking at him and strode over to introduce himself, but only as Simeon.

“This is a very interesting group,” he said. I knew what he was talking about.

“I have a lot of friends,” I said. Something in his look was telling me that he wanted to believe I was not trans. Plenty of people had no idea. I suppose because I had never been effeminate, I presented as not effecting female behavior, but I had learned to blend in. But being surrounded by transwomen committed to being attractive to me I could hardly not play that game. My hair had grown and was thick and lustrous, and I kept it styled. I wore makeup to show off my large eyes and full lips, and to create a slimmer nose and good cheekbones. I was attractive in a natural way, and I knew it.

“I wonder if you would consider joining me for dinner after this is all over?” he said.

And do not think that I was never propositioned before this. I had been living as a woman for months by then. When I mixed with my sex worker friends at the beginning of all of this I had been approached by all manner of people from low-lifes to those who were gender curious and not unpleasant. I would accept a drink but never a date. Even in business when it was assumed that I was a cis-woman, there were the full range of people interested in taking me out, but I was always too busy to say yes. Now it seemed to me as I looked around the warehouse that I was organized and had time. It suddenly seemed hard to say no. So I didn’t.

We went to a place he knew. He was a local and knew the city well. I was keen to learn more about him, or rather it was better to as him to talk rather than try to tell my own story.

He did say that he visited Sonoma often and I told him that I was involved in a vineyard up there. I would say that: “Involved”.

“I know,” he said. “I know all about the vineyard and what a great job you have done with it. I am afraid that my father ran it into the ground, to feed his drug habit and his dreams of being in movies.”

“Your father?”

I am Simeon Landry,” he said. “Miles Landry was my father.”

It caught me off guard, but it did not strike me that he had concealed it from me. Yet it did provoke a response that surprised even me.

“Was? I have not heard from Miles for some time but I was not aware that he had passed. But then I was not aware that he had a son either.”

I was starting to think about my stash. It suddenly seemed to me that my identity and my wealth was under threat. I had piled money into the vineyard. Admittedly it was mainly cash that needed to be laundered, but the business was my source of a legitimate income, that name on my credit card, my home in the country. It was everything.

He must have seen it on my face. I pride myself that I give nothing away. I have stood beside friends who were suddenly executed and not betrayed my dismay of disgust. Had I lost that ability?

I was still taking hormones. Perhaps I could have stopped, but they had become a routine. I suppose that I was trapped in my disguise, but I never thought of it that way. Being Consuela meant that I was safe. Safe and legally living in the United States of America.

“Don’t worry, I would not interfere with what you are doing,” he said. He reached out and took my hand. Rather than pull it way, I let him. It felt good. “It is just that he has been dead to me for some time,” he continued. “And to be honest I would not be surprised if he turned up dead. He went off the rails long ago. How he has survived this long I will never understand.”

“I owe him everything,” I lied with reassurance. “He had confidence in me and I have done my best. But it was not his money. There are investors.” I was just protecting my stake. But suddenly it seemed like the wrong thing to say.

“Not illegal money I hope?” he said.

I just smiled. I don’t know why. Perhaps it was irony. Like everything coming home to roost.

“You have a beautiful smile,” he said.

I fell in love. How is that possible?

I have told myself since, that no meaningful relationship that I might have had before Simeon was real. I had always assumed that I was a heterosexual male. Is orientation about sex or about love? For a man you can have sex with anybody. My experience with my friends had proved that – a full spectrum from a guy in a dress to a beautiful post-op transwoman and no shortage of men wanting sex with any of them. But love – had I ever experienced that before?

He knew it too. I firmly believe that love is like that – it is a joint thing. If it isn’t it is just lust or obsession. It is love if your look meets his and you get the same back.

So it turned out alright in the end. After we married we applied to certify Miles as dead and we now own the vineyard and the business together. But he still works several days a week in the city and we keep an apartment there.

Yes, my friend was beside me when I had my operation, but it my case I healed in the presence of love. I had finally crossed over. It was a crossing that I never thought I would make, but now I know that I am home.

The End

© Maryanne Peters 2020

Author’s Note

Eric is always coming up with ideas based on real life circumstances, and I have him to thank for reference to the article reproduced at the beginning of this story.