Discharged Female

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I was drafted into the South African Defence Force (SADF) in June of 1981 having just turned 17. I was quite young to be conscripted but this was the height the “Border Wars” and “Operation Protea”. Angola was in civil war, and it seemed to our then white nation, that hordes of black communists were ready to invade. At the same time the black population of our segregated nation was also aware of revolution in the nations to our north, and they were seemingly ready to rise up against apartheid rule. If you were a white South African in 1981, you were worried.

Plenty along side me were happy to serve – happy to fight for a racist regime to preserve a way of life that seemed offensive to the rest of the world. For my part, I would have said (if I was asked) that I had no thought of politics and that I disliked violence. I would also have happily admitted that I was gay, but nobody asked the question – not until I was in the army.

I discovered that there was a very good reason for that. The Military in South Africa needed to be strong but also white. The official policy was that if you were a permanent member of “the Force” you could not be gay, but gay conscripts were allowed. It is simple really – it was seen as too easy to escape being drafted by claiming to be homosexual.

So what do you do with gay soldiers in an army where such people are banned? Well, that government decided that there should be forced “therapy”. This should come as no surprise. The apartheid regime was a fascist regime, even though they might deny that word. The black people of the nation were a lower life form, and just above them Asians, then white homosexuals. We were all sub-human o put it in Nazi terms. Whatever their self-justification may have been, they felt themselves able to abuse us mentally and physically.

It is now well known that the leading player in what became known as “The Aversion Research Project” was Colonel Dr. Aubrey Levin. He was one of those people who believed that medical science could resolve any illness, and homosexuality was an illness.

I had only been in the Force for about a week when I discovered to be ill. It was in the communal showers and there was some malarky going on. I got a moderate erection. It was noticed by some and referred to the Sergeant-major. I was sent to sick bay for assessment. Stupidly, I felt that the best thing to do was to come clean and admit my preference. It seemed to me that I could not hide who or what I was.

I was transferred out of my training unit immediately. For a while it seemed as if I was going to be discharged from the Force as unfit. A physical problem discovered was treated in this way, but only (as I was later told) problems that were incurable. My illness was curable. Medical science had a remedy.

I was not alone. The “hospital” was just another barracks building in another SADF base. There were about a dozen form my intake who were sent there, but I was closest to Morne and Karl, two young Afrikaners. Seemed more gay than me, but Karl was big and strong, and hung like a horse.

“What do you think they are going to do to us?” Morne was afraid. I have to say that I was resigned to my fate. I was gay and gay men suffer, or we did in those days.

Karl was ready to fight. It was probably the wrong approach.

The first “treatment” was electric shock therapy. You are strapped to a chair with electrodes attached to your upper arms. Your penis is exposed, and a small sensor attached to it. A screen then displays a picture of a naked man, and the attending physician watches for a sexual response. If it comes, you get a jolt. If you continue to respond sexually to men, the voltage goes up.

It is very simple really. Conditioned aversion. Simple and totally ineffective.

Perhaps I should not say totally, because there we enough who must have been able to work the system somehow and claim to be cured. I cannot blame them for avoiding pain, but this just encouraged the use of this torture. I had no idea. I was in the peak of advanced puberty. Any naked man could turn me on. The occasional picture of a naked woman did nothing for me.

Morne and Karl failed too. Was anybody changed by this? It seemed unlikely to all of us.

So what do you do with somebody who cannot be cured? Well, medical science has the answer to that too. If you are innately sexually attracted to men, then you must be a woman.

There are still people who cannot believe that this could have happened. It seems hard to believe that in a developed nation, those in power shaped by Britain and the highly educated nations of Western Europe could believe that sex change surgery was a cure for homosexuality. But that was the medial opinion that prevailed in the South African military, and that was the final treatment

It started with “chemical castration”. Male hormones were neutralized by drugs administered (injection and oral) and female hormones were introduced in the same way. My attraction to men did not cease but the response of my penis certainly did. In fact my penis shrunk away to a tassel.

It had the same effect on Morne and Karl. Morne accepted it as I suppose I did. But I think that he had an idea in his head that he might be cured of his homosexuality. I never believed that. For Karl the loss of his potency and even his libido, was soul destroying. He would never recover from this trauma.

I was pronounced as a suitable candidate for “realignment”. At the time I had no idea what this meant. All that I remember is that even before it was discussed with me, Dr. Levin (“The Colonel”) contacted my parents and arranged for them to come to where I was being “treated”” at No. 1 Military Hospital, then called Voortrekkerhoogte, in Pretoria, to be interviewed.

My mother explained to me later how horrified it was for them to learn that I was mentally ill, and how now that I was a member of the South African Defence Force, they had assumed the responsibility to ensure that I could be cured and go on to live a healthy and meaningful life. She said that the way it was explained it sounded as if my life would be a misery without “realignment”. My father’s reaction might have been more straightforward – better his son was dead than gay, so if there was an outcome that was not either of those, he was for it.

“The State is looking after you, Son,” he said. “They would not be doing this without a sound medical reason. You do not want to go through life with this affliction, do you?”

What about my consent? I don’t think that I was ever asked. The Colonel simply advised me what was about to happen and then it happened. It was just like everything else in any army – you don’t get to ask questions; you don’t get to say no; you “do and die” as the poem says.

Later the Colonel was to say that we all consented as many as 900 of us had some surgery upon our genitals. From the safety of his new home in Canada he told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up after the end of apartheid that “aversion therapy only caused slight pain and all my patients wanted to be cured”. He said the same thing to journalists even when he was on trial in Canada for assaulting patients.

He was furious at comparison with Nazi Germany, because the Colonel was Jewish. In fact, his father had been the first Jew to join the National Party which established the apartheid regime. His family were not just supporters of apartheid, but instigators.

But this is my story, not the story of that man. This is my story of how I entered the South African Defence Force as a young man, and I was discharged less than a year later, as a woman.

I was told that I was fortunate to have my surgery done by a surgeon experienced in sex reassignment surgery. Not everybody was that lucky. I now know that it was my further good fortune to have a complete vagina constructed, some simple had the genitals removed and some were simply castrated. My groin was fashioned to look like a woman and I could receive a man and reach an orgasm, as I was soon to discover.

Morne was not so lucky. They made a mess of his surgery. He went through life a castrated gay male. We lost touch. Karl could never come to grips with what had been done to him and I learned later that he committed suicide.

Once surgery took place the Force would not being paying for hormones, so the only other signs of a feminine body was the soft adipose layer under my shaved skin and those early breasts that a young girl might have. If I wanted breast implants I could pay for those myself once I was discharged.

The only other gift that I was to receive from the Force was new identity papers. As a division of the South African government, they could do that – issue me with a new driving licence, social security number and a modified birth certificate to allow me to obtain a passport. I could have chosen a new surname if I wanted. Many did. But I kept my family name and chose two new given names, but my name was always shortened to Meg.

I was discharged from the South African Defence Force. The discharge form said - “Deemed unfit to serve”. But I suppose that it was military custom to give me something, so I received clothing – an ill-fitting bra, two pairs of panties, a dress and a pair of women’s shoes with a slight heel and a leather bag with a hairbrush a tube of lipstick and a tube of mascara. There was an envelope with a train ticket home, some spending money and a cheque for the balance of my pay soldier’s pay up until the day of discharge.

I called my mother to ask her to pick me up at the station at the end of my journey. I told her that I would be wearing a dress, and that the army was “done with me”. I think that I may have cried a little. Perhaps that was the last of the state sponsored hormones working on me.

When I stepped down off the train my parents were both there. My mother hugged me in a way that seemed different.

“Welcome home, Meg,” she said. She seemed glad that I had been transformed. Of course she had no idea that I was still in some discomfort and that I had a huge plastic object inserted inside me from the groin.

My father just looked at me. It was clear that he did not know what to think. I said that I had assumed that his attitude was “better dead than gay” but I was alive, and ready to dally with men. If I was his daughter then that might be alright, but was I that?

To be honest, I did not feel that way. My mother said that I needed to accept my new status. She had filled a prescription for hormones sent to her by the Colonel, and she had arranged for me to go to the local hairdresser and beauty salon to do something with my hair, and my face. I could hardly refuse her.

But the whole idea seemed ridiculous. I was not a woman. I was not even particularly effeminate. What traits I had picked up I had learned from others like me at the hospital. I thought of myself as a gay man without a penis. But that view was to be changed suddenly and painfully.

There was an older man in my life, before conscription. In fact he was only 8 years older than me. He was not even my first gay encounter, but I felt that when the time came, he and I might be a lasting relationship. He was the first person that I visited. I dressed completely as a man. He was keen to have sex and I was too, but I had to tell him that I was a changed person.

He was horrified. He said that he had heard rumors that this was going on, but he did not believe it. I asked him to tell me that it would make no difference to him and me. He bit his lip. I started to get worried.

“Even if you are not a woman, you are not a man anymore,” he said. “I am sorry, but I am a gay man. I am attracted to other gay men.”

It was like a bullet to the head. I thought that waking up without genitals had destroyed me, but this was worse. I was official neutered. It seemed that I had no future in sexual relations.

I ran home in unmanly tears. My mother was there to comfort me.

“Why would you want to go back to being a man,” she said. “There must be 50 times more men interested in you as a woman that there are men interested in you as a man.”

A gay man might say that it is probably more like 20 times, but she had a point. And as had been made clear to me, I was not a man. Gay men like to reciprocate. I could never really participate in gay sex again. But I could have sex with a man, if that is what I wanted.

My mother gave me the hormone tablets, and I took a dose. She showed me a dress that she had bought for me, and some better underwear. The truth is that on the train trip home it had been hot and I quite enjoyed a dress during the summer. My mother confirmed the appointment at the salon and we went together.

She told the ladies at the salon that I was her daughter Meg. It did not take much effort to work out the truth, but we never said it. There was a general discussion about what gives away a man pretending to be a woman. I learned a lot that day. My mother was popular in our small town and she had a close circle of friends who were ready to help me to become complete acceptable as a woman.

But the main thing that I learned that day was that women truly are different. They are close and collaborative where men can be isolated and independent. I like being a part of a team. I am not talking about a forced team like sport or the army, but a group that you want to be a part of and you feel comfortable in.

And then in the weeks that followed I learned something else – that being female is not about the way you walk or how you hold your arms, it is a state of mind. I just had to find it.

I went accessed our new home computer and explored there to see what it meant to be transgender, but that was not me. These were people who already had the state of mind I was looking for. It seemed that for them it would be easy, just making the physical changes would be enough. But I learned that some of them were going through what I was, in particular if they had spent a long time as a man.

In the course of my research, I learned that there were others like me and Morne and Karl – victims of Dr. Aubrey Levin discharged as women – hundreds of them. Most of them had serious issues. It was a serious challenge - gay men made women who were trying to live. I learned that the SADF had encouraged many to cut themselves off from their families to start their new life, but without money for hormones or support groups, some had turned to suicide as Karl had. It all made me very angry rather than sad. I was determined that I was going to succeed in the manner I had chosen. I would become a woman.

I may have gone a little over the top at first. I grew out my hair and got a spiral perm that was all the rage at the time. I started to wear makeup even around the house. The one advantage in all of this was the response of my father. He still regarded me as his son in drag, but by making it clear that I had no wig to take off and I was living 24 hours as the very feminine Meg, he came to accept me as her.

I worked part time at the salon (where I worked on feminine skills) but most of my time was spent on the home computer so I started to use that to improve my skills in typing and data input. This was 1982 and computers were very primitive, but people with any skills were in demand. By the time Christmas came around decided that I was ready to head to Cape Town and get a job as a woman.

“This is a big step for you, Meg,” my mother said. “But you are ready, and we are proud of you.” As if to prove it my father gave me a hug that he never would have given me if he did not believe I was now his daughter. I cried and he wiped away my tears.

I arrived in Cape Town at the end of January 1983. I got a job almost immediately, and nobody had any idea that I was anything other than what I appeared to be. Fortunately, my rough edges were easily explained by my being a small town girl. It helped that my town was not well known so everybody assumed that it must be “in the bush” so odd behavior could be excused if I was a good person.

I was a good person. I had always been friendly and while I had been teased as a boy for being less than a man, now among strangers I seemed to have found a place. I quickly acquired a tight group of girlfriends.

I was good at my job too. At the time it was assumed that only men truly understood computers, but women were helpful on the keyboard. There is no doubt that understanding the processes requires some logic which comes naturally to men, which may explain why I had it. Keyboard skills are acquired and I had those. I was to build a reputation as a whizz with computers.

But these were difficult times in South Africa. There were bombings and general unrest in the black population. Cape Town in those days was very white with black people doing menial work and living in huge slum areas around the city. The Prime Minister was P.W. Botha and he was a practical man. He knew that apartheid could not last, and he was prepared to make small changes. It was not until a stroke forced him to retire and F.W. De Klerk took over, that things really started to change politically.

But the only politics of concern to me was the repealing of “The Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act” which happened in 1985. It was the beginning of the end of apartheid. It put an end to the prohibition of marriage and sexual intercourse between white people and people of other races, and it meant that my relationship with Michael Kruger could now be known.

The name Kruger is synonymous with the Boers or Afrikaners who seemed like the key champions of racism in South Africa. I was of British stock and like many English-speaking South Africans we saw ourselves as part of a wider world where the Afrikaners did not. Black people also speak English as the universal language, and that was the language of the black nations of Africa. I am not saying that there were not racist people among English speakers, but in my experience they were fewer.

But Michael was not an Afrikaner – he was what was called at those times “Cape-colored” – the child of a black mother and an Afrikaner father. He was like an insult to both communities.

“To the whites I am black and to the blacks I am not just white but part of a racist community,” he said. I understood better than he knew, but at least I was able to pass as female and not try to live in the middle.

He should have been bitter about his situation, and I guess he was. But he was driven by driven by his adversity and he was successful and rich. And he had a huge cock, and he wanted a white girl.

At the beginning I wondered if I was not just a trophy, and maybe I was. But the sex was great and so I did not care. He allowed me to know that I was a sexual being once again, and as it turned out, very sexual indeed. I had cared for my artificial vagina throughout my long period of uncertainty, and it paid off. It was simply fantastic. He never asked for anal and I never offered it even though it had seen service in my past life. The fact is that my vagina has a single purpose, and that is to give pleasure. Women born as that cannot say it.

But there was something of the gay man in me that expected it to be given to me hard, and at the beginning Michael was like that. It seemed that my white body needed to be pushed hard into submission. There was no specific violence, but some might say that he would know the consequences of that. So he gave it to me the way I liked it.

But then he fell in love with me. And I fell in love with him.

“I understand how lucky I am to have you,” he said. “I am a brute, and maybe I have treated you badly? I will try to be more gentle with you.”

“I want a brute,” I said. “And no, you have never treated me badly. Don’t change – just love me.”

So he did.

As long as the immorality law stood, we needed to be together in secret. But then in 1985 I was proud to say that I had a colored boyfriend. For him having a white wife gave him status, and a beautiful one even more status. It helped him to build his business and become even more successful.

People said that we would have beautiful children, but as I explained to Michael that was not possible for me. All I said was that my womb had been removed. It saddened him but it did not make him love me less.

White people would stare at me when I was with him and some would even spit on the ground and even heckle me, rather than Michael. But things were changing, and I felt that I was at the forefront. That made me proud. He made me proud.

Even my father liked Michael. I only told my parents about him after the law changed and they could see how in love we were. Michael talked to my father about a new South Africa where the lines between races would be broken down by couples like us. It seemed to be happening, but very slowly.

Still, we had to wait for another nine years before the 1994 election put an end to the white regime. That year both Michael and I voted for the National Party, which was much changed in the de Klerk years. It seemed to Michael and me that as a mixed couple it more closely reflected the nation’s aspirations for the future.

Now that future has come to pass for us both, although Michael died of cancer last year aged 62 leaving me a widow at 57 having lived 40 years as a woman. Because he remained ignorant of my real status, I would not write my story while he had passed.

We did have a family in the end. We adopted colored children who could well have been our own and who were so readily abandoned even as the situation in South Africa was changing. I found fulfilment as a wife and mother, but most of all as a woman.

But after he died, I could not stay in South Africa. It was becoming dangerous for the wealthy, whether we are white, or colored, or even black and rich. One of my adopted children moved to live in New Zealand, and as a mother, grandmother and widow, I was allowed to immigrate with her and her family.

I have written my story to bring attention to the fate of others who suffered under the hands of the South African Defence Force and the Colonel – Dr. Aubrey Levin. For many the ordeal was the cause of a lifetime of suffering, and that story may be too hard for them to tell. My story on the other hand, is one of brutality followed by a life of joy and satisfaction.

I joined the Force as a young white gay man, and I was discharged a woman. I thank God for that, daily.

The End

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Author’s Note: Incredibly, this story is based on fact. Dr. Aubrey Levin is a person (you can read about him on Wikipedia) and he is still alive in Canada and out of prison. There are no precise records of the number of people he had surgically altered but a large support group of people affected still exists in South Africa, sadly depleted by suicides.