The Sundial

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I have always drawn to the sea, and I guess that was down to my father. He was a ship’s engineer and I saw little of him when I was very young, but whenever he was home he would bring strange objects and stories from the places he had been. It seemed as if his life was like a fairy tale. I wanted to follow him.

It annoyed my mother that I would ignore or even disobey her, or treat her as badly as I now recognize my father treated her. The fact is that wanted to be with him, and in high school I had that chance. He took me out of classes for two months and on a voyage on the freighter he was working on. I had to do required study but I spent most of the day with my father, not just in the engine room but in every corner of the ship where engineers are responsible for piping, tanks and pumps. I loved it, and I acquired some skills.

We stopped at ports and I mixed with seafarers, but I was young and small and I hoped that I would grow up to be like them. The fact is that I never really did. I stayed small and skinny.

But even after my father had stopped coming and I had abandoned my mother for good, I stayed involved in marine trades, working in the big marinas of San Francisco Bay. I worked on boats and went to sea when the opportunity arose, usually as a junior engineer or marine electrician.

Then one day, the ocean-going sailboat “Sundial” cruised into a guest berth at the marina.

I had worked on sailboats before, but this was something special. It was high-tech – a sailing catamaran with a broad beam and a wing mainsail. It looked like its name – a white octagon with the mast and sail casting a shadow. The wind sail and a furling head sail were controlled by electric self-tailing winches to allow for the craft to be operated solo, but it was clear that it was built to accommodate a number in luxury. I was told that it had four toilets, and one of them was blocked.

The advantage of being small is that you can get down inside smaller craft to find problems. I was the right man for the job, and I was called over to meet the owner, and the only man aboard.

His name was Avery Dunleavy. He was maybe forty, tall and tanned, and he said that he was in IT. The push-pit overhead rack had communications as well as radar and steering gear, plus solar, wind and wake power generation. He said that he could work at sea anywhere in the world. He said he only needed one toilet, but the blocked one was in his ensuite.

I found the problem and fixed it. He was very impressed.

“This boat can sail itself, I am heading out on a long voyage,” he said. “I can deal with all the electronics aboard but what I really need is another crew member with skills like yours. So what do you say, Paul, would you like to go to sea as my crew? I am happy to pay.”

I didn’t even ask how much. I was ready to go. I just had to head home to get my kit bag and send a message to my mother in Palm Springs, and then I was aboard and we were sailing.

I had spent plenty of time on sailboats in the bay, but this was my first time out on the open ocean. It felt great, and the moment that the continent disappeared behind us I felt that the adventure that I had been waiting all my life for was about to start.

“There are three staterooms aboard so you may as well have one,” said Avery. “The big one is in the bow. To be honest now that I am on my own I prefer the one just below us on the starboard side as it is closer to the cockpit. There is one on the other side.”

He explained that his girlfriend had left the boat in Los Angeles before he sailed north, and the largest stateroom was full of her stuff.

“I can take the port stateroom, if that’s okay?” I said. “I just can’t find my kit bag. The grey bag?”

“Oh Paul, I’m sorry. The dirty grey sail bag? I thought that was rubbish. I left it on the dock. Hey, don’t worry. We have plenty to wear on board. And when we get to Hawaii we won’t be wearing much.”

I knew that it was 2,500 nautical miles to Hawaii in a straight line, but with the prevailing westerlies we would head south and then catch the northeast tradewinds. If we could average over 7 knots, we could be there in two weeks. But the course would not be direct and even a multihull cannot count on such high boat speed. But as Avery pointed out, we had all the comforts, and an autopilot.

The boat was provisioned with nothing but the best, and it turned out that Avery was a good cook and enjoyed cooking. But for breakfast he insisted on special smoothies to start the day, one each “tailored to improve each of us” as he said. It seemed OK to me.

But then he told me to go to the bow cabin to find something to wear, and things got a little strange. The bow cabin was huge running from one side of the vessel to the other, with a walk-in wardrobe on one side and a bathroom on the other. The wardrobe was full of clothes, as were the drawers there and in the dressers, but they were all women’s clothes. I expected that I might find something that might be at least gender-neutral, but there was nothing.

I found some white shorts with a lace hem and a light blue top with beads sewn around the neck. The sizing was perfect for me. It looked like a very girly outfit but it was the best I could do. Still, I went back on deck sheepishly.

“Surely you could do better than that,” said Avery with a smile, but not a mocking one. “If you are going to wear women’s clothes then you should look for something a bit more comfortable. It is not like we have to work.”

He was right. It took us only a few days to reach the trade winds and from there sailing was easy. The wind was strong and across us slightly astern. On “Sundial” you simply set the autopilot to Oahu and leave everything to it. The helm might shift a little, and maybe a few times a day the winch might take in or let out a few inches automatically, but there was nothing to do except relax and take in the sea view.

If anything, we were at risk of getting bored. So, the challenge was for me to find some clothes that I might feel “comfortable” in. I would dress and he would look on.

As the weather got warmer I explored dresses. There was no doubt that the racks in the wardrobe were full of light loose-fitting garments that would be perfect for hot weather. And Avery was right – if you aren't working, such a garment is more comfortable.

“I have often thought that I should wear a kaftan or something like it on voyages like this,” he said. “But I just don’t think I could pull it off. You, on the other hand, look great in that outfit. But maybe try something else later on. As the sun sets why don’t you find something a little more suited for cocktail hour.”

That was how it started. I had never had any thought of dressing as a woman before I set foot on “Sundial” but what started as necessity, became a pleasure. There was never anything kinky about it. It started with finding clothing I could relax in, and then it moved on to clothing that he thought I looked good in.

I cannot remember how far we had sailed when I first applied a lick of mascara and a little lipstick, and pulled my hair up in a topknot. It was just for fun. We had cocktails as the sun disappeared and I pretended to be a woman he had just met in a bar, making up a life story for his entertainment.

I moved into the bow cabin, just because that was where my clothes were. I took advantage of the bathroom and all the stock of feminine products. There was shampoo and skin moisturizers. Somehow it simply seemed that dry skin on my legs had become a problem and creams require that legs be rendered smooth.

I would appear in the morning dressed as I felt like.

“Who are you today?” Avery would ask. “Are you Paula, Paulette or Pauline?”

“I am Pavelina, the Russian supermodel today, Mr. Dunleavy,” I might say. She always addressed him that way. I might be another of the four if I changed for lunch, and another when I changed for dinner. It was a game, and we both liked it. I never thought that it would be any more than that.

I was Paulette, the spoiled girl from the valley when the Islands of Hawaii appeared one morning. The Big Island was to the South of us off the port quarter, so I knew from the height of the volcano it must be less than 60 nautical miles. That would put the Ports of Honolulu dead ahead only another 60 miles. That should have shook me back to reality, but instead Paulette squealed with excitement.

“When we land let me take you to dinner, Paulette, and maybe put you up in one of those plush resort hotels,” said Avery.

I should have pushed her out then, but I didn’t. I just gushed as she might. I guess I was as excited as she was – it was just that I never would have shown it, but for her, it had to come out. Maybe that's when things really changed for me.

The wind picked up a little as it can do around the islands, and we gathered enough speed to make Kahanamoku Lagoon well before dusk. Avery would not let me do a thing – not even prepare the fenders for our arrival at the visitor’s berth.

“You’re Paulette tonight, remember,” he said. “Get yourself ready to go ashore. You will have to find yourself some shoes.”

I don’t know why but I chose heels. I was not familiar with them, but as I explained to those who could see I was unsteady – “I've been at sea for over three weeks, so I'm still finding my land legs.”

The first of those were the ladies at the spa Avery had arranged for me at the big hotel right next door to the marina. He said – “You look great but let’s just polish you up a little.” He had arranged a hairdo, a facial and makeup. I just went along with it. It was all new to me, but then for all my boating experience I had never even been out of California.

We went to a meal at a local restaurant that served food described as “Tahitian – Pacific ingredients prepared in the traditional French style.” It was great. And then Avery had me put up in one of those hotels on Waikiki Beach – my own upper floor suite.

When I woke up, it was like waking up. I went to the mirror and looked at what had happened to me. My hair had been colored and curled, my eyebrows plucked, eyelashes extended and dyed, what beard I had pulled from my face. This was not just dressing up – I had been changed, and I let it happen. I sat there in my hotel robe in a state of shock.

Then the bell rang. Avery had sent up to my room a Hawaiian-style print dress with a hibiscus hair clip. It came with an invitation to meet him in the lobby at 9:00 for “a tour of the island.”

I was angry. It seemed that he was pushing me into something, or it felt that way. But the dress did look nice, and it came with decorated flipflops and a little coconut leaf bag with some lipstick and a hairbrush. Before I knew what was happening, I was doing what he wanted. I got ready and met him downstairs.

I realized that he just wanted to be in a Hawaii in the company of a woman. What's wrong with that? At the time, that might be what I wanted. Walking around and sharing meals with some boat bum was not what I would have wanted, so why deny him his pleasure? The way I figured it, I was in Hawaii because of him. I was having the experience of a lifetime at his expense. Surely I owed him at least this – whatever it was?

It was never sexual. We had separate rooms in that classy hotel. He never made any suggestions. If anybody asked if we were a couple, and a few did, he would just look at me with a smile. It was like we had everybody fooled, so I smiled back.

We stayed on Oahu for a week, and then it was as if we both understood that it was time to go. It seemed like the sea was calling us, if that does not sound too pretentious. Anyway, we re-provisioned and we were off again to Fiji – 2,700 nautical miles in a straight line.

The trade winds come from the east throughout, moving to the southeast over the equator, but they are perfect for a boat like “Sundial” and this meant another four weeks of easy sailing for Avery and me. We picked up where we left off with him being the owner and captain in the company of four women, with only one of them on deck at any one time. The difference was that it did not seem like dressing up anymore.

I suppose that I had learned that I could pass as a woman, and maybe I could even live as a woman. The only person missing from the boat was Paul. It was not that there was no room for him – it was just that he wasn't needed. He did not fit.

I have thought about whether it was down to Avery and his personality. Was he so powerful a person that he changed me? Or was I so weak a personality that I allowed myself to be changed? It started out as me being so grateful for being allowed to realize a dream that I owed him, and if he wanted this to be the manner of repayment then I would accede. But during that second leg I started to understand that it was something different. In his presence I felt that I was not a man. At first I felt that I was like a child – weak and needy. Then I became like a woman – yielding but demanding. It was a progression.

And I could see how much he cared for me. You cannot spend so much time in close company with only one person and not learn to understand them a little. He looked at me with more adoration than craving, but there was something there that would ultimately see me surrender myself to him totally.

But first we arrived in Fiji. We docked at a Marina on the west side of the Main Island and for the first time I needed to produce my passport. There was an embarrassing moment when the customs official looked at the boy on the passport and the woman before him.

“Welcome to Fiji, Miss,” he said. I learned later about the strong tradition of feminine men in this part of the world.

We stayed in a resort in Fiji and it was there, during a massage that I first became aware of the breasts that I had developed. I wondered for a moment whether it was just my body changing me in reaction to my behavior, but I soon realized that it must be drugs, and that it must have been going on for some time.

Avery admitted it. He was giving me hormones in my breakfast drink. He gave me the impression that it was only since I started living as a woman in Hawaii, but I later found out that it has been a part of my diet since San Francisco.

I was angry, but strangely angrier that he had done it behind my back than that my chest was now like that of a teenage girl.

“You can choose whether or not to continue,” he said. “But I love your breasts.”

We left Fiji and took a short voyage to New Caledonia, which is a French territory and quite developed. Avery took me out to a fantastic French restaurant as “an apology.” It was fantastic food and the atmosphere was bewitching – fine fare and tropical night airs with the setting sun in the background. I had to forgive him.

His treat was to ask me for the next destination. The ports of Australia were nearby, but the Paul in me still hungered for adventure, and one place that had always fascinated me was Truk Atoll in Micronesia, 2000 nautical miles to the north.

We took aboard some special food and fine French wines and we set sail, heading north with the trade winds still with us across our starboard side with the Solomon Islands to the East.

I took the hormones in my breakfast drink, and I even agreed to accept some shots and patches under my breasts.

I suppose by this point I understood that I had passed some point of no return, or at least unlikely return. I asked Avery whether he wanted to sleep with me, and he said that he did.

I had never had any sexual attraction to a man before, and I am not even sure that I was attracted to men even then, but I was drawn to Avery. It seemed to me that whatever I was, I belonged under him, as his plaything. When he entered me for the first time it just seemed right, even before I felt any pleasure. In fact the pleasure was a surprise, and a very thrilling one.

There was a diving resort at Truk. We stayed there, telling everyone that we were man and wife. I could wear a bikini then. I had something close to real breasts, and not much of a bulge in the groin. We dived the lagoon as I had dreamed of doing since I first heard of this place.

Avery asked me where we should go next. He said – “I am the captain, but you are my compass.”

I chose Thailand – 3800 nautical miles due west and being close to the equator the winds were very weak. I think that I understood that my new gender was permanent, and that I needed to take steps to prove to him that I was serious, but this leg was the hardest in the whole voyage.

I thought that as we drifted and caught light breezes and crawled along our line, that it was just boredom and the constant sight of one another and nobody else that drove us apart. It never occurred to me that he might not wish me to rid myself of my male anatomy. I just assumed that he had tired of me.

As for me, it was like I said, I am not sure that I truly loved him. It was rather that I had come to accept that I belonged to him and that my life was in his hands.

When you make a decision to cease to be a man and become at least the semblance of a woman, you ought to be clear that you can find love in your new form. Looking back I was not very clear on that at all. What was clear to me in my hospital bed was that I was not going to set foot on “Sundial” again. He would sail away and I was forever changed.

He paid for the surgery and he gifted me a large some of money, and on the beach in Pattaya I met Jason who was there on holiday. I did find love and we married last year.

But I still wondered about Avery Dunleavy and about “Sundial”. It was only recently that I learned that I was not the first young man who joined him on that boat, or the first young woman who disembarked. There was at least one before me, and there has been one since.

I must confess that in reflection I was not surprised. Who keeps on their boat clothes of the right size and cut to fit a small slender man, or glamorous shoes a little too big for the average woman? And what man keeps a stash of male hormone blockers and powerful female hormones aboard his boat? And then the shots and patches for the moment that his shipmate accepts his fate?

But I am not bitter about what happened. In fact, quite the contrary. I had the chance to have an adventure and to live another life, and then to decide that I preferred that life over my own.

Did Avery Dunleavy push me into it by the power of his personality? I don’t know, but I had no sensation of that. Perhaps he saw in me that I was a latent submissive in need of a change of life, or maybe even a transgender person in denial? Whatever he saw in the young man, that person is gone. I have found my life, and I am happy.

But I spare a thought every now and again, and I imagine “Sundial” with its wingsail casting a shadow at 4 o’clock, full of wind, with the wake showing good speed, and the tall man at the helm, hands free, and a person beside him, in a pretty dress … man or woman.

The End

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