Subversives

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Tom, have you given any thought to working in the field?” I could not believe that I was hearing the words. It seemed too good to be true. You don’t join the CIA to spend your life translating wire taps for all the agents who cannot be bothered to learn a foreign language. You want to do good. You want to see action. I had to keep my enthusiasm under control.

“Sure,” I said. And then, to show that I was ready I added: “I have done the firearms training and I shoot on the range about once a week. And I did the self defence thing, and I go to the gym as often as I can and …”. Steady. Don’t go over the top

“Great,” said Deputy Director Montrose. “But we are just looking for a fairly low-level infiltration, and somehow you seem to qualify.”

What an odd choice of words. Somehow? I should have said: “Explain”, but I just said: “Ok”.

“Well, we are looking to enter a foreign enforcement agency to get some information, and the first level entry is controlled by facial recognition software. You know the thing. It seems so basic these days, but it is hard to beat. We can actually breach the second level of security easier than the first – the camera. This recognition software is very precise. All about points on the face and precise measurements. Very hard to beat.”

“So, I have the right face?” I said. It was now obvious that was why they would pull me out a back room and throw me onto the front line.

“We use the same system ourselves. It’s substantially American. We ran it over a bunch of their employees and cross-checked with all our lingually qualified employees to find a match. And we matched your face with somebody in their agency who has the right security level.” He stopped, looking a little uncertain.

“Ok,” I said. Waiting for him to continue. Instead he looked at the papers in front of him. “I have covered surveillance on some of their agents,” I said. “Perhaps I might know his name?”

“Well, that’s just it,” said Deputy Director Montrose. “It’s her name. Her name is Tania Volenz”.

The strange thing is that I recognized the name. Their agency was a large organization, but she had a senior role, despite speaking no English. She was very attractive. I had a photo of her somewhere in the soft files. She had my nose.

“Just a minute,” I said. “You want me to pretend to be this Tania Volenz? You want me to pretend to be a woman?”

“It’s a very small job,” he said. “We would prepare you. We have limited time. Believe it or not, we think it easier to prepare you to do this than to find some other way to get into the building. We have considered alternatives. Believe me, it was as big a surprise to us when the facial match came up. I mean, a guy matching a woman’s face? That is odd”.

He stopped as he could see that it was awkward for me. I was small, but I did not think of myself as looking girlish. Perhaps Tania had a face that might have been considered masculine, but when they showed me the image of her they had, more recent and higher definition, I considered her beautiful. Perhaps that is because if we see ourselves in the faces of others, we are drawn to them? Is it vanity?

Nor did I think of myself as in any way effeminate. Perhaps the face might fit, but that would not be enough.

“How could I possibly pass for a woman, even for a very small job?” I asked. There were two others in the room, one male and one female case officer. I knew neither, but I looked at them for support.

“We think that you can do it,” said Deputy Director Montrose. “It will require a level of commitment. But we require that kind of commitment from all our field agents. If this is the work that you want, then … well, it is your call.”

He knew I wanted this. Who in the intelligence community does not want at least a taste of the frontline? I had put my name forward many times, to no result. It seemed that he knew that I would blurt out my agreement. So I didn’t. Instead I said: “Tell me what would be involved.”

“My name is Maria.” The female agent spoke. “I would be your coach. We would need to fix your skin and hair, and do something about your voice, and then I would coach you in feminine behavior. A crash course. We want you in there within a week. We would take her out, and put you in.”

“My voice?” I asked. I completely ignored the remark about “taking out” this person. Did that mean killing her?

“We’re hoping that you will not need to do much talking,” said Deputy Director Montrose. “We had thought about using just lip-synced recordings, but if you are asked any questions, you need to answer in the right voice.”

“Even if I could pass as a woman, how could I expect to pass as her? People know her.”

“Not where we are sending you.” This time the other man in the room spoke up. “My name is Frank Salter and I would be your handler. I know that sound slightly demeaning, but it is just a phrase we use. I will be your contact with the Agency. Let me tell you about Tania Volenz. She has the seniority to have access to these records we need, but she never normally goes there, so she is unknown in that part of the building. It will just be into the file room and out. You will never set foot in the general office area where she works.”

I wanted to ask what would happen to her. Could she be drugged? Did she have to die?

“If you pull this off, there might be a future for you in this kind of work,” said Deputy Director Montrose. He knew which buttons to push. I knew that now was not the time to be concerned about collateral damage. If I was going to work in the field I would need to harden up.

“If I never go to the records division, why am I going this time?” I asked.

“Good,” said Frank. “That is the right question. We have some paperwork that will explain what you are supposed to be doing in the most secure part of the records section, but what you are really looking for is the subversives who have infiltrated the intelligence services of our allies. We need details. We will root these people out, but not before you are clear.”

The notion of it was exciting. Just the thought of me running from the evil headquarters as they explode behind my back was the stuff of movies. It seemed to me that not only was I going undercover in a manner I had dreamed of, but that I had a role to play in saving the world, or at least our part of it. I was thrilled by the notion. How could I not agree?

“I’m in. What do I need to do next?”

“Come with me,” said Maria. “We have a lot to do in very little time.”

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The question is, how much needs to be done to minimize danger of discovery? They said that they would make everything available to me, but how much I was prepared to do, or allow to be done to me, was my call.

“Proper removal of hair on your face is essential,” Maria said. “We don’t know how long it will take and we cannot have a 5 o’clock shadow appearing. The hair must be good. You could use a wig, but I think that human hair extensions will be better. Apart from that, your features are small, so I just recommend a little plumping of the lips in keeping with the images of Tania that we are working from. Makeup will do the rest.”

They did not have to tell me about the risks of being caught. It did not bear even contemplating. I took her advice.

“As I said, we have to do something to give you a feminine voice,” she said. “Coaching will not do it. There is a small surgical procedure that will tighten the vocal cords so as to lift the tone of your voice. You don’t have to do it, but if Tania needs to talk her way out of trouble, it had better not be in a baritone.”

Do that too, even though it left me no voice at all for two days, and potentially a lengthy period afterwards to get my old voice back.

“We can pad your clothes, but it is summer so we don’t want you to appear out of place dressed from neck to knee. I suggest that we will need to work on using some of your flab – repositioning it so that you can wear something sleeveless and a little lower in front. And because you will need to tuck away your junk, I am going to suggest some drugs to send you genitals to sleep for a week or so.”

No man likes to hear about anything of that kind, but I recognized the importance of having the best disguise possible. I agreed to that too, and woke up from the anaesthetic with swellings on my chest and less flab on my belly, but hardly a female form. Later I was to be introduced to the shape wear I would need to struggle into to give me that.

“Now comes the hard part,” said Maria. “Acting as a woman. For that, we will need to start at the very bottom and work our way up. Fortunately, we plan that your time presenting as female will be very short, but during that time acting in a feminine way must be automatic. It will mean learning and then having many hours of observed exercises over the next couple of days. But we can also use that time to familiarize yourself with the office you will be walking into.”

Because the procedure on my throat and the numbness in my injected lips, I could do little to ask or object. The whiskers were ripped from my face; I was subjected to deep facial moisturising; my legs were also waxed; hair was added to mine so that it dangled to my shoulders matching the image of Tania that I had seen.

But as I looked in the mirror, I could see that I appeared startlingly similar to Tania. No, not similar. Her double – her doppelganger.

“You will need to learn basic hairstyling and makeup techniques,” said Maria. “If you hair is out of place or your lipstick smeared, you need to know what to do.”

The garment that I was given to try on was tight and uncomfortable – at least at first. It gave me an hourglass shape with a full bust and butt, and it strapped my junk tight with the penis drawn back so that I could pee sitting down without taking the thing off. My panties, which seemed to me to be unnecessarily feminine given that nobody would see them, would be worn on the outside of the concealing garment.

The floorplans were available. I knew exactly where to go, and when. The idea was that the work could be done in a single day. Things would be busy in the records section for the first few hours after clock in, but according to Frank, it would empty out around late morning. I had a few hours to keep my head down within the building, and we discussed how that could be done. I would not enter the file room until 10:30 am.

Finally, I was able to use my new voice. It was disconcertingly high: “I’ve got this. I am ready when you are,” said the new Tania.

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The sun was just a faint light below the horizon when Frank went in. There was another with him - somebody from the local team. Tania’s unit was on the second floor. I waited in the hall, dressed for work and ready.

She was asleep. They used a spray to silence her and an injection to render her unconscious. I did not see it but as it was only seconds, I could see that they were efficient. I stood by with what I discovered was a folded trunk which they quickly assembled. It was the standard “body removal” box, which was strong and hand good handles so the two of them could easily carry it and load it into the van.

“Familiarize yourself with the apartment in case you need to come back here,” said Frank. “But remember, our plan is in and out in one day. You arrive at 8:00 as every morning, and if you are done by lunchtime, get out then. We will be ready for you at 12:30, at the West entrance. A red van. If not, make one call to the assigned number to confirm that you are still in play, and then get out on the building at 5:00 with the other staff. Understood?”

I seemed to me that it was almost impertinent, given my preparation. But I said: “Got it.”

I watched them fold her legs to get her inside the trunk. As her head lolled back, maybe because of the dim light and the fact that she was without make and with hair tied back, it looked like me. It looked as if I was being bundled into that trunk and taken to God knows where. Would I ever get back? Would my body be found dead floating down some river?

After they left, I should have had breakfast, but I just made myself some coffee, and roamed through her home. It was better appointed than I would have expected. She was senior enough, perhaps. It was tidy, organized, colorful, feminine. Somehow, I felt at home in this place.

Her bedroom was inviting. The bed was soft but firm – a Goldilocks perfect. There was pot pourri making it smell peaceful, despite the sounds of early morning traffic outside.

Her dressing table looked like that of a woman who took care to present well, yet the images of her seemed to show that she did not overdo it. She was not pretty in the little girl sense – she was striking – attractive in an exotic way. Not sexy, but with the hint that she could be. There was a lipstick that caught my eye. Maria had chosen my look for this important day, but somehow I thought the shade I was wearing was wrong. It needed to be something more forward. I used a tissue to remove the old shade and I applied the new one with my skill so recently acquired.

I took a cab to the office building. Tania would have been on the bus, but today was different. It was my call. Today she would not ride the bus. I used the flip down vanity mirror to check myself again. I looked good. Not just like a woman, but like an attractive woman. I felt good. Not nervous as I should be, but confident, self-assured. It hardly seemed possible. It was not my nature before, but now it was. I smoothed a shaped eyebrow to ensure perfection.

The first barrier was card entry. It was in the bag that had been on the table by the door. Tania’s card. I breezed through bag check and the body scan with a smile. As I came up to the second barrier I looked up at the camera. It was exactly like the one at the agency that had put me here – the same hardware as well as the same software. Ours, not theirs. The one that had picked me out of our staff as being a match for a woman. How was that possible? I looked like her now, I guessed, in a floral dress with my long dark hair, painted eyes and bright lipstick.

Right to the wing of the building where Tania worked. Left to the Operations Section and records – general records on level one and secure records on the basement floor below. It was 08:06am. Turn left. Down the passage. Elevator down. Card swipe to select secure basement floors. Waiting to descend.

There was a mirror on the side of the elevator car showing me in profile. Tania. Good legs – smooth and showing a hint of early summer color. The shaper was doing its work on the waist, but not the butt, and the chest, that was real, just properly supported with a bra that was not too uncomfortable. How was it possible? She smiled at me. She was gorgeous, at least to me. I had looked it up - homogamy – we find people attractive who are like us. She was a female version of me.

The doors opened and there was yet another security check with a barrier, a camera and a male guard, young and good-looking, checking a screen.

“Miss Volenz, we don’t see you down here very often,” he said, in a professional tone. But there was something else on his mind.

I started to worry about how he knew me and if I should know him, but it seemed that the software had worked again, and my name was on the screen in front of him. I smiled. I had the paper’s ready.

“Not often, no,” I said. “We have contract from somebody who is claiming to be a sleeper with over 10 years of immersion. I just need to check his details against the secure information.” There was enough on the papers I had with the names redacted. It was above his security grade. These very secure records were for limited eyes only. No copies run upstairs. Nothing appearing on a screen which another could see. For these records somebody like Tania would need to compare her files with the data in records. That data was on paper or could be viewed on terminals unconnected to any database or link leaving the basement.

No cellphones were allowed or any means of copying files. I handed my phone in, but a micro-camera was concealed in an earring, which had meant my ears needed to be pierced. I removed them and put them in the tray. There was a chance that they would be impounded too, but the guard He hardly seemed to pay any attention to them. He smiled as I collected them and waved me through. I could feel his eyes watching my butt walk down the hall in the manner I had been instructed, just a hint of sway. The heels were not very high, but they helped.

I felt slightly aroused, but fortunately with whatever they had given me days ago that caused no discomfort. Was it the thrill of getting inside the last level, or of being admired?

It was only then that I realized that I had jumped the gun. I was in the file room. I was not supposed to be there until 10:30 and here I was. I had been given some other places to pretend to be researching before going downstairs. But why? Here I was. Going back seemed stupid. I would have more time in the file room.

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I made my way to the personnel files of current operatives filed by country. I was given three countries to look at, but for some reason that had me walk right past the section headed “United States of America”. It was a large section. Troublingly large.

I went where I was directed and found a handful of current operatives among a larger number of other files for many others marked: “Deceased”, “Defected” or “Compromised”. I put my tiny camera to work.

It was still early. I had time to gather more intelligence. What case officer would not?

I went to the USA section and pulled down some files. There were many old files of people long dead, and many more marked “Defected” or “Repatriated” but there were some current files. These would be foreign agents operating within our country. I had to collect their names and aliases, and any other information to run them to ground. I started to work the camera. And then I opened a file that made my blood run cold.

“File 3363/18 Frank Leland Salter. Inserted into the CIA counterintelligence.”

It was him alright. There was his photo. He was an American. He had been recruited by his wife. She was there too and had a file next to his. Katherine Maria Salter, born in Poland.

I recovered my breath to take some photos but I knew that I was in danger. He would not have allowed me to get this far. Something was supposed to happen to me before 10:30 that would prevent me from getting down here. Whatever it was it would not be good. And 10:30 was not far away. I needed to get out. I had the information and much more besides. There was no reason to stay, and plenty of reasons to go and get out.

But my only contact was him. He was my handler. I could not report to him. It would mean a run to the embassy. Could it be done?

But first, pack up and get out of the file room.

For some reason despite the impending panic, or perhaps because of it, the first thing that I felt that I needed to do was to use the bathroom. I found the Ladies washroom and I chose a stall and lifted my skirt and pulled down my panties to sit and pee. Nothing seemed more natural somehow. I wiped myself as if I had done it a thousand times. I went to the mirror and redid my lipstick. I felt so calm and cool it was if I was somebody else, so Mata Hari or other accomplished female spy ready to take on impossible odds.

But this was real. I collected my phone at the guard’s station and walked up the stairs to General Records.

“Tania!” Somebody called out. I felt as if I should freeze but I kept on walking. “Tania!” I could not ignore this. So I turned.

He looked familiar. Perhaps I had seen his image in some file. He was big and looked dangerous, but he was also good looking, and it seemed that somehow I now had a better appreciation of that. Obviously he knew me, or rather her. It seemed that if he got closer, or if I spoke in my voice which was feminine but probably not hers, he would know that I was an imposter. I just made him a signal to acknowledge him a smile and let him know that I was in a hurry to be somewhere else.

But that was not enough. He walked towards me. I was waiting for the look of realization to cross his face. But nothing came.

“Not so fast,” he said. “It seems that you are heading in the wrong direction.”

I knew in that moment that here was the man who was about to kill me. Probably he would torture me first. Who was the only person that knew that I should be going downstairs at 10:30 instead of leaving those stairs, except the man send by Frank Salter to stop me?

But his face then broke into a smile. It could have been one of those villainous smiles. But it did not seem that way. He said: “So it seems that we have some time for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria just over there.” He motioned me through as a gentleman casually might.

There was no chance of making a run for it. I was hardly dressed to do, and there were still two barriers in front of me. I had to play this out and take my fate whatever it might be.

As he motioned me to a table I asked: “You know who I was supposed to meet at 10:30?” It seemed to me to be a question that kept my options open.

“Better me than somebody else,” he said.

By this point I was confused, but somehow optimistic. He was one man, and I was not being led away in chains.

“I find it so interesting that you are such a beautiful woman,” he said. “I know her. The real Tania. The face is the same, but she has no light in her eyes. Isn’t it strange that a personality can shine through a face like yours?”

“Clearly you have no idea who you are talking to.” I still felt the need no to admit that I was not her. Was this whole thing some kind of interrogation? I had no escape, and it seemed that he was trying to get me to say something.

“You voice is not hers either,” he said. It seemed as if he was admiring me. “Hers is deeper. It goes with her serious demeanor. There is a lightness about you. You can be her. But rather than adjust yourself, we could have her experience a change. Something that gives her a new outlook.”

“What are you talking about?” And as I looked at him, musing about me performing this act he had clearly caught me in, I found that rather than fear him, I liked him.

“We need to get rid of her – the real Tania,” he said. “We could have her taken, but you will be lucky to get anything out of her. She is too tough. And I will need to deal with my superior. He is the only one who knows. And then there is your mole. Whoever that is. Your own subversive. My counterpart. The one who arranged for you to be intercepted … 10 minutes ago.” He was looking at his watch.

I understood. It was unbelievable.

“Frank Salter. He is here in the city. Probably with the real Tania. I am guessing that he will arrange her escape. Sometime before my scheduled exfiltration. 12:30. There will be a red van at the West entrance.”

“My guess is that he will have her with him earlier than that,” he said. “Her presence will reveal that you are an imposter. Let us hope that the van really is red and really will be there. But I need to get rid of my boss first. Then I can meet you there.”

“You are not American, are you?” For some reason I felt the need to ask.

“No,” he said. “I am local. But I am committed to freedom and justice and I have had the same employer as you for almost ten years. It is just that I have never achieved the security level that you enjoy – Tania I mean. With somebody here operating at that level there is nothing we cannot discover.”

“So for me to do that, you simply need some event that changes her personality from hard bitch to whatever I am?”

“That’s right, and that’s easy,” he said with a broad grin. “You fall in love with me. You move in with me. Our life will be filled with joy.”

“If you know who I am then you will know that there is one major obstruction to that,” I said, somehow with a feeling of disappointment. It seemed that here was somebody I would be very happy to work with, who was offering me adventure, and something else – companionship – a partnership that would have to be close. Very close.”

“When I saw you, I could not believe it was true,” he said. He reached across the table and took my hand. I would have pulled it away, but I was somehow happy to feel his touch. “Now that we are talking together like this, it seems almost impossible to believe. But our work will be important. And surgery these days can perform miracles.”

The End

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A person smiling for the camera

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