Marooned

A Short Story from an Idea by Erin

By Maryanne Peters

Phytoestrogens were behind it. I found traces of the seeds and even the pollen in the articles that she brought back. She did not have much, but a scientist such as myself knows what to look for. I was seeking information about what caused such radical changes.

It happens and is not uncommon. A junior rating inexperienced in life at sea on a cargo vessel, falls overboard in the middle of the night before retiring. If you say you are going to bed, then go there, and do not go on deck to take a breath of air without telling somebody. Of course they turned about and conducted the mandatory search in the morning, but was really no hope that he would be found, and he wasn’t. Fortunately he found something to cling to – just some of the flotsam or jetsam which pollutes our oceans but may save a life.

Finding the island was another stroke of luck – not just a sandy cay but a rocky out crop with pools of fresh water in small caves above the high tide mark. And there were coconuts, and rock pools and coral reefs with fish and shellfish, and there was a large volume of flax, which has edible and highly nutritious seeds.

There was also another edible plants on the island. It was a *cucurbita* species, from the same family pumpkin and other squashes or gourds, but not the same as many of the cultivars in common use. It produces small pink pepos (as the fruit is called) similar to a tiny butternut pumpkin in shape and structure. I know this because I was able to grow this from one the seeds that I found and to test the chemistry.

What we know about flaxseed is that it has very high volumes of lignan, a powerful phytoestrogen, when eaten raw. The small squash had lignans too, but when the pepo fermented, as it did when the seasonal fruit was gathered and stored, those level rose dramatically exceeding the quantity in raw flax seed. As it was, our survivor who did not care for coconut except for the water, and who found fishing difficult, this squash became the principle food source.

In effect the body this young man marooned was being flooded with phytoestrogens.

There has been much said of the feminizing effects of phytoestrogens on the male body, and much of it is pure nonsense. But the fact is that with the small amounts in soyabeans, legumes and some seeds, huge volumes of these foods would need to be consumed for there to be any significant effect. But the fact is that a diet based entirely on two foods with abnormally high phytoestrogenic had never been encountered before.

We are not just talking about casual impotence and a little gynecomastia, we are talking about genital dislocation and psychosexual disarrangement.

I said that fishing and seafood gathering became difficult, but in fact it was not preferred. Apparently quite early on the young man concluded that the easier route was to rely on a plant based diet and to concentrate on personal appearance rather than pursuing any idea of escape from the island.

I am mindful of Homer’s tale of the island of the lotus eaters, where residents are simply content.

That is how she was found. I say she now because that is how they found her. I have spoken with most of them and to my staff. The story is remarkable.

The island is well known to navigators and is clearly visible on radar so that most vessels avoid it, but the vessel “Ornelle” was on a survey mission taking water samples and collecting some floating plastics. It was a chartered vessel and the crew were career seamen or ocean fishermen, with only two scientists aboard, the dour old Maggie Gordon and the pleasant but unattractive Kaye Martyn. It was Kaye’s suggestion that the small boat be taken to the island to check for plastic that had been washed up there.

She and two sailors had not even landed when they saw the resident of the island sitting on a rock combing her hair – a comb was one of the few things in the pocket of the original castaway.

“It’s a mermaid!” As Kaye recounted it both men said it at the same time. She herself, even though steeped in the scientific method, imagined it might be true for a moment.

She said that the remarkable thing was that this apparent woman did not rush to the boat or fall to her knees, rather she just strolled along the beach as if she was the Girl from Ipanema – tall and tanned and young and naked.

It was only when she got close that Kaye noticed something out of place. There was still an appendage where one should not have been. But it seemed that her two companions were too absorbed but other aspects of her appearance to notice.

“Miss, do you speak English?” one of them called to her.

“I do,” she said, as if it were just casual conversation, according to Kaye. She said that the voice was deepish but not unfeminine.

They had sacks for collecting plastic, and three holes were cut in one so that the mermaid could attend to her modesty.

“My clothes have rotted,” she said. “I have allowed myself just limited exposure to the sun with coconut oil to gain some protection.” Kaye said that it was like they had just met on Venice Beach.

They were going to rush her straight back to the boat, but she assured them that she would take a moment to “collect my things” so Kaye went with her and set the men to beachcomb for a few minutes. She said that the shelter was a cave with panels of woven coconut. The cave included a pool of fresh water fed from the rocks above but was otherwise dry. Flax had been dried to make finer fabric and this had been stitched with flax thread and a fishbone needle. A mattress of this fabric and stuffed with dry coconut husks had been made, together with some clothes, but it seemed that nudity was preferred. The castaway shoved some fabric items into a flax bag.

“What is your name?” Kaye asked her. But the response was a look of puzzlement. Kaye guessed that this must be stressful and that the behavior indicated that, so she did not press. Her objective was to help get her to the boat and take things from there.

Back aboard, the rest of the crew were quickly abuzz. It seemed clear to most of them that this was the real thing. Generations of folklore must have some factual background some of them may have reasoned. Those who had witnessed it gave a vivid account of her body, perhaps even mentioning the trace of a tail between her legs, visible from the front.

But the “woman” was taken to the research suite and to replace the sack she was offered some clothing – men’s jeans and an oversized shirt, overalls that might be called gender neutral, or one of Maggie’s floral dresses that hug off her skinny frame without shape, but were preferred in warm weather. The stranger chose the dress, but on her body it acquired an entirely new look.

“That is going to get the crew excited,” Kaye was said to have remarked, possibly regretful of the fact she received no interest, even on long voyages. But she is a professional.

The crew christened her “Marina” and she appeared to like the name. But it was not what the skipper wanted.

“I have to call this in. We have a survivor. We need a name. What is your name, Sweetheart?”

“Marina,” she said. With some satisfaction. “Marina Maroon”.

The captain was exasperated. Maggie called me, but the man in command got in first: “It is a scientific breakthrough, Professor,” he said to me. “We have found a mermaid. Shall we put her in a sample bag and bring her home?”

I must confess that when Maggie explained some more I agreed that the voyage should be terminated just a couple of days ahead of schedule, and the boat should head for home. It would still be a week before they arrived, and it would be an eventful one.

Marina appeared on deck in her dress and the crew just went nuts, they are all agreed on that. Nobody disagrees that she is beautiful, and I am told that on that evening, standing by the rail with the wind blowing through her hair as she seemed to feed of last rays of the sun, she was a goddess. The Goddess of the Sea, no less.

The crew demanded that she dine with them. The two sailors who had gone to the island even suggested that she belonged to them, as if she were a wreck on the beach and they claimed salvors’ rights. They wanted to hear her sing and watch her dance. They simply assumed that she could do both, when I know now she can do neither well.

The captain said that she was a guest of our foundation who had chartered his ship and that she would be quartered with the scientists and dine with them, and with him too, and the first mate, if they were not just too busy. The captain told me later that this was the closest to mutiny he had ever experienced in a long time in command at sea.

Then a fight broke out between the two sailors who had gone ashore. Maybe it was who had seen her first, or touched her first, or maybe just who was the better man or the more deserving of having his very own mermaid. Moments later other crew members were taking sides and it seemed as if there might be a pitched battle, until the first mate intervened.

That night before retiring the Captain carried the crew’s request that Marina should attend “a parade of the ships company on deck at noon” the following day. It was an imposition, but would she agree?

“What am I going to wear?” she said, looking at Maggie and Kaye.

Kaye told me that she did not think that her beauty could be improved on. That night as she slept Kaye started dreaming about how Marina might look. Kaye confided in me that she had developed a bit of a crush on Marina too, although she maintained that she was not a lesbian. I never thought she was.

“But it just stuck in my craw,” she told me later. “I could see that this was not a real woman but maybe a shipwrecked transgender person or something, but all these guys had their tongues hanging out for her – never for me!”

She must have been able to shelve that. She wanted Marina to look her best. She found something very colorful in her wardrobe and wrapped it around Marina to better show off her figure and used her curling tongs and a little makeup to good effect.

The crew were dumfounded. She went along the line taking each man’s rough hand in hers as each of them introduced themselves and complimented her – as if they needed to when Maggie told me that their eyes said everything. Maggie disapproved of the whole thing – she is always saying that the behavior of men must be one of the greatest mysteries in science.

She said the men were drooling. The first mate had sworn them to good behavior on the promise of a peck on the cheek from the mermaid herself. That she delivered with grace to end the audience

Marina told me that if she ever had a thought of going back to what she was, it left her then. Alone with just her view of herself in the pool in her cave shelter, she could see how different she looked even as she watched her body change. But now she understood that people were drawn to her – or men anyway.

It seemed to her that the island had bewitched her and transformed her. She had no knowledge of phytoestrogens, and had never heard the word before I used it. The food she consumed may also have had some psychotropic effect, although I chose not to investigate that. To Marina she somehow charmed and following a path of fate. She had been gifted food and shelter and in exchange she must become something else – something better than she was.

In addition to physical changes estrogenic compounds can produce passive behaviors, and perhaps the absence of simple sugars may also have brought about some lethargy, but this seems to have been motivated by spiritual thoughts. Who knows how people react to such conditions, being deprived of human interaction and with a slim hope of rescue?

It is not that I observed her to be in any way disturbed. I confess I had expected that when I went down to the dock to meet the boat and see this ‘mermaid” for the first time. Nothing could have prepared me really. A young man who has been stranded on an island perhaps for years, his body ravaged by an irregular diet, his mind by isolation and despair to the extent that he thinks himself a woman, or possibly even a mermaid. I was ready to face the worst.

And instead she walked into my life. She walked right up to me and I remember those first words.

“Hello,” she said. “Until we know different you had better call me Marina.”

I think that I fell in love with her then and there. As a scientist I know all about pheromones and human cycles and the studies of mutual attraction, but none of that seemed to apply here. If you consider for a moment that as a matter of scientific fact the woman I love is not biologically female – not XX chromosome but XY chromosome. So what does that do to your science?

No, this was something else. Fate (as she calls it) or human nature or one of those things that we do not yet understand, and perhaps never will.

All I know is that I love her, and she loves me. That second fact seems like a miracle to me. I don’t care if she is Marina or Michael, if she is a woman or a man or a mermaid. It is her I love.

Clearly some changes need to be made to that magnificent body, but only enough to allow us to love with our bodies as our hearts demand.

Science is still what I do, but now with even more fervor. I was doing my best in my studies to preserve the world’s oceans, but now as much in gratitude as in commitment, because it seems as if the sea has delivered my wife to me.

The End

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