Progression

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

The first time he did it, it was just an opportunity. The man who offered him a ride across the desert was talkative and told Cain all about himself. Cain would not have been interested normally, but this man Alex was intriguing, so he listened and learned. He had a way of talking that Cain longed to imitate – a slow drawl that somehow sounded wise, even if the words were stupid.

Alex was not the first man Cain had killed, but he was the first that Cain had worn like a new suit. It seemed so easy to become Alex. He was so easy to imitate that Cain just fell in to being him, despite the obvious differences.

Alex’s Driver’s License was so faded that he was able to change the date of birth 1967 to 1997, which the photo so washed out that it could be of a man any age. Cain even grew his hair even longer, as Alex wore it to his shoulders. But whereas Alex’s hair was brown, fine and thinning, Cain’s hair was fair and thick. Cain could not grow the straggly beard that Alex wore, but he did his best. He put the license on the dash to fade some more.

Alex travelled with cash, which made it easy to be him. Cain used his only credit card just for a second ID, and signed for something once or twice, havening mastered Alex’s child-like signature from the bac of it.

In the back of Alex’s truck was a bolted-in lock box with things that were readily saleable. But selling for cash almost cost him.

The pawnbroker noted: “You are Alex?” And when Cain nodded, he said: “This certificate in your name, according to your driver’s license your were only 4 years old when you got it.”

“A gift from my granddaddy,” said the new younger Alex. A good enough story. He collected $6,000 for that memorabilia.

It seemed as if this new Alex could go on forever. Nobody was looking for him. He was leading a life on the road. But all cash is finite. The road must come to an end. You just need to find a turnoff before you go over the cliff.

Young Alex picked up the occasional hitchhiker. It amused him to be able to recount the stories the older one had told, now strange out of the mouth of so young a man. Alex was a talker where Cain had been something else entirely. Cain bottled things up until there was an explosion.

It never occurred to him that a hitchhiker would be his next suit to wear, although the young Alex did make a victim out of one, just because he needed to smell death. No. Young Alex looked to stop in small towns or by substantial homesteads. But nothing seemed to work out.

Then Beatrice, or just plain Bea, stepped into the seat beside him.

“I just live 60 miles down the road a ways,” she said. “I had a fight with my folks yesterday, but my guess is that after sweating all night they will be forgiving when they get back from the Fair tonight.”

Young Alex spoke of the eternal problem of communication with youth, although he was not much older than she was. She had a cheeky and cheerful disposition that appealed to him. Never once did he think of killing her. He would take her to her door, as a southern gentleman should.

Some how discussion of the young and the old turned to modern banking.

“I sign for my credit card,” said Alex. “I just don’t have a good memory for those pin numbers, and I am always worried that if somebody gets my card, they will find it out and take all I got.”

“It has to be random,” she said. “so, well - I can tell you because you are from out of town so I won’t see you again – I have two cards and I use the last four digits of one as the pin for the other. It’s random you see.”

“You sure are smart,” drawled Young Alex, but it struck him then that she was very dumb. With two cards he could use one to pay the other and keep going for months. And there was still cash in his wallet from old Alex, even after the lock box was empty.

But he could not be her. Or could he?

“Could I just take a glass of water before I am on my way?” he said as he pulled into her driveway.

“Come on in,” she said. “It is the least I can do for driving me all this way.”

He strangled her to keep traces to a minimum. She reached out to claw his arms so he needed to cut her nails and put them down the sink.

He found her room at the top of the stairs. There was a red suitcase which he filled with what he thought she might take as a runaway. There was a shoulder bag too, now full with everything a girl might need, so he thought.

She had a diary beside the bed. He tore out a page and then practised her handwriting on later pages, having plenty to work with. She would take that, once the note was written and left on the kitchen bench:

“Mom and Dad, I have decided to try living independently for a while. If you love me give me the chance to prove that I can do this. Bea”

But she would take their car. It was the small yellow Japanese car. It was the one Bea drove all the time, although it was in her mother’s name. It was in the garage. He put the suitcase in the trunk and the body in the back seat, wrapped in polythene and covered with a sheet.

The last act as Alex was to drive the truck a distance from the house and then run back to the house. There would need to be a transformation but not there. No evidence could be left there. On his way out of town he torched old Alex’s truck.

He drove for miles to an isolated place. He could not use a motel where he would enter as one person and emerge as another. The best that he could do was to find and break into an abandoned cabin which had running water and a wood burner but no power. It would have to do.

She used a facial wax to rip the beard from his face. It was painful and left the face inflamed, but there was moisturizing cream. The razor was easier on the arms and legs. She washed her hair, and after it was dry, she did his best to tie it up on her head, as Bea did. But there was much to learn.

She experimented with the makeup in her bag. She mastered the mascara first, then the eyeliner, and finally the lipstick. It was not as easy as she thought. She began to wonder if this was the best course. But there were those two credit cards with her first name in full – “Beatrice”. Not something he could bluff his way past. Those cards were his lifeline – her lifeline.

And then she had already developed his plan. With the note to her parents, there could be plenty of time without somebody tracking her down. She could be Bea. She could walk into any store and present either card and say: “Hi. My name is Bea”.

She tried it looking into the blistered mirror hanging on the bathroom wall: “Hi. My name is Bea”. Then again, a little higher: “Hi. My name is Bea”. She smiled. She was now Bea.

The hair was a little darker in the photo ID, but girls change hair color all the time. The nose in the picture was smaller, but not by much, and the lips a little larger. Could make up fix this? At least that was now an option. The other Bea had not worn a lot of makeup, but the new Bea might have to.

She burned the body of the girl who had been Bea in the open and buried it behind the cabin. Then the new Bea drove into the small city nearby and visited the local beauty salon.

“Hi. My name is Bea. My nose is too big and my lips are too small. What can I do to improve my look?”

She was determined to learn all that she could, and fortunately the beautician was keen to impart the necessary knowledge.

“You must have led a very sheltered life, Young lady,” the woman said.

“My parents were very strict,” said Bea. “I have told them that I have decided to try living away from them – independently – for a while.”

“Are you looking for work?” she asked Bea. “We have an opening for a shampoo girl and trainee manicurist while our usual girl is on maternity leave.”

Work was something to be avoided. This life was about taking advantage of what happens, or the people who come along. Not work. But Bea saw the advantage in staying for a while to develop skills that might be useful for life as a young woman.

It was just not what had been planned. It was not supposed to be a woman’s life that was assumed. It would have been easier to be a man. But then there are advantages in being a woman, especially a woman with all of the resources of a beauty salon in a small city like that one. That was the lesson that Bea was about to learn.

Men buy a pretty woman drinks. The new Bea was like the old Bea – outgoing and adventurous, but less of a tomboy now that femininity was essential. She worked in a beauty salon and learned the art of beauty. And she quickly learned that being beautiful, even if it is only skin deep, has its advantages. In short, she was desirable, and so desired.

Bea began to think about the next target – not because she needed to, but because she started to think about a way out of being Bea. There were plenty of men keen to talk to Bea and to tell her about their lives. But those lives did not sound nothing like as interesting as the life that Bea now led. Strangely, Bea was beginning to enjoy being Bea – finding out how good it was to be Bea.

Work was hardly work at all. It was just talk. Bea had learned that the salon experience was a social engagement. They talked about all things girly. Bea suspected that by now her co-workers (or most of them) realized that he was not entirely female, but they chose not to broach the subject with her. She was one of the girls. It was not like any friendship in any prior existence. Had Bea come to try to recall one, she would have failed, simply because there had been no friendships in any prior life, including the life of Cain, if that was the first.

Home is where your friends are. Think about it. For the first time in their existence, this person was at home.

Then she was discovered, in a way. A very attractive woman arrived for a booked facial, and as a junior Bea was given the task of using the electrolysis machine. She had used it on herself and had acquired the skills.

“It takes one to know one, Sweetheart,” the lady said. Bea could hardly deny it. “But it looks to me that you are pre-HRT, and as I am post everything now, why don’t I let you have my supply. No, please, don’t refuse me. I would like nothing better that to see you blossom as you should.”

Bea was not sure that she really needed to blossom, but she was curious. She wondered what the effects might be, so she followed the prescribed dosages.

The visible effects took time, but perhaps it was the invisible effect that made Bea continue. The lust for blood disappeared. Thoughts that used to rush into her head as she listened to some poor fool chat her up in a bar, just never came after the first week on hormones.

The old Bea may have been a bit stupid, but the new Bea was not. A desire to kill is a problem. Assuming the lives of others is a necessity. It allows for staying ahead. It is survival and therefore justified. But gratuitous murder for pleasure is wrong, because it means risk without tangible reward.

For now Bea was able to live and learn, but in time she would be ready to move.

The signal for that came in the form of Gary Kimble, or it should have.

Bea assumed that Gary was a private investigator hired by Bea’s parents now some months after her running away. He was to disclose that he had been able to track the use of her credit card and find where she was living and working.

Gary did not initially disclose that he was a special agent with the FBI. He simply approached her as she left the salon one evening, only mentioning his name and saying: “Your parents are worried about you, Missy. They just want to confirm that you are alive and well.”

“As you can see,” said Bea playfully, flicking her hair as she often did in front of strange men.

“Perhaps you could just stay in touch with them, or maybe allow them to come and visit you here?” he suggested.

“I am not staying in this place,” said Bea. “I am just working for a little money and then I am headed to take on the whole wide world. But sure, I could send them emails maybe.”

“It seems like you have finished for the day,” said Gary. “Can I buy you a drink.”

Bea had not bought a drink since she arrived in this town, and she did like a drink every now and again. So if she accepted drinks from those men, she could hardly say no to this man. As she thought about it, he could pass on to her parents that Bea was happy and well, and living her life as she wanted to – without them.

It was only when the first drink was ordered that Gary pulled a crumpled folder from his jacket pocket bearing the FBI monogram. It had a photo of old Bea pinned in it, but she was pleased to see that it looked very much like her. There was another photo in there she recognized.

“I should explain that I am a special agent with the FBI,” she said. “And I should also say that I am very happy to find you alive. You see I am not really investigating your disappearance at all. The bureau has a wider remit to investigate crimes in multiple states, across state lines. In this case murder.”

There was a part of Bea that shuddered. But that was not the part that gasped: “Do tell me more”.

It was not a tease, or even for the purpose of drilling Gary for information about how close they might be. She was desperate for the stimulation. She had spent everyday for months talking shit to the women in the salon, colleagues and customers alike.

In fact, even before that Alex was dumb, and talked dumb to dumb people, and Cain had not been much brighter. Bea could hardly remember who started all of this, but she was sure he was not dumb.

“I met with your parents because I was tracking people who disappeared around the same time as a certain vehicle was found burning on the outskirts of your hometown. That vehicle belonged to a person that we suspect may have committed a series of murders. I wonder if you can tell me if you have ever seen this man.

It was Alex. A sharp image, even sharper than the face she remembered. Certainly, sharper than the IDs that had been used. He was younger than when she knew him, when she was him. A police mug shot from years ago, perhaps.

She examined it closely but shook her head. She asked: “What kind of vehicle was it? Maybe I have seen that.” But she said she hadn’t.

“It’s a moving target, and all we see is the trail it leaves behind, and even that is concealed where he can.” This was not the first dead end in this inquiry, and Gary was not expecting to be the last.

“So do you have a profile on this travelling killer?” Bea asked. “I know you do such things, right?”

In his years in the FBI, one thing Gary Kimble had learned was never to judge a book by its cover. Here he may have supposed that the cover promised a body ripping romantic novel, or at best some soft porn, but as he read through the first chapter of the Book of Bea, he realized that this was a far more complex work of literature.

“That’s more than one drink, so I guess I should buy you dinner,” he said.

“You don’t have to,” said Bea.

“I want to,” he said. “The Bureau will pay”.

“Cost’s of interviewing a witness?”

“Sadly for the investigation, you are not that, but they are no to know that my work is over for the day,” he said. “Don’t tell my boss, but he is paying for our date tonight. If you agree to be that, that is?”

“Oh Special Agent Kimble, I would love to have dinner with you,” she said. “Given the great work the FBI do it would be wrong of me to refuse.”

She was smiling, and looking exceptionally good doing it. Gary Kimble’s heart may have missed a beat.

Bea needed to be careful. She could not talk about her past. She needed to change the subject when he raised it. Who knows what her parents may have said – it might conflict with any story she might make up. She said: “I was hoping that you would visit my parents and tell them that I am happy. I can never go back there, do you understand?”

“Having met you, I do,” he said.

Instead she wanted Gary to do the talking, and in her company, he was happy to do that. As a hairdresser Bea had developed the skill of appearing enthralled by the most mundane tale, but in the case of Gary, he really was interesting.

It seemed unbelievable that they should be the last table seated in the restaurant when service closed.

“I need to get home,” she said.

“I wish the night could go on longer,” he said.

“I’m not that kind of girl,” she said.

“Perhaps next time,” he said. “I am headed back to your hometown tomorrow. I’ll be picking up the trail where I last found clues and see where that takes me. Not here I think, but now I have another reason to come back.”

“I told you that I am not staying here long term,” she said.

She had intended to kiss him on the cheek as a parting gesture. It would not have been the first time. A girl cannot expect free drinks without showing just an inkling of gratitude how and again. But the gesture turned into something she had never been in before, the passionate embrace of a man, his tongue in her mouth, or was it hers in his?

She hurried away from the scene as if he were lying bleeding – not with guilt or fear, but excitement.

She never saw him in the morning. He would leave early, without even brushing his teeth, to keep the sweet taste of her in his mouth.

The taste of him would linger for her too. Before she slept, she had considered whether it was time to move on, in case he did return. But it seemed to her that for him the trail leading here had well and truly gone cold.

And in the morning, she found herself hoping that he would return, just to see her. Such irrational thoughts had no place in her reasoning head, she reasoned. But were other things at play – feelings. She may have put it down to new body chemistry that had by this point effected huge physical changes. But somehow that explanation seemed insufficient for the power of the longing that she felt.

She had learned that Gary had been asking around about whether she had a man in her life, or ever had since she came to town. That made her smile. I never occurred to her that he had considered whether she might have a connection to the killer. In any event, there was nobody but her.

She found herself looking at the salon window for his face, expecting to see him across the street or driving down it, and being disappointed to the point of physical pain. It seemed to Bea that this was a terrible state that must govern the behavior of lesser people, and now she was a victim. It seemed like injustice.

She dreamed of sex with him. She dreamed that she had a vagina and he was on top of her. There was heat and pleasure, and she would wake oozing from what had once been a normal penis, now forever limp and concealed.

But in her more thoughtful moments she understood that his return might spell her doom. These feelings were beyond control. If he reappeared, she might throw herself at him and be found out.

She found herself thinking about surgery. The thought seemed to be almost demonic. How could she ever consider such an awful thing? It seemed to confirm that she was losing control. She wondered about killing somebody, just to confirm that she was normal. But even that seemed to be a problem. Was it the hormones? Could it be love? There had been a change.

Was the answer the truth? It was not something she was familiar with.

These people she had been were nothing more than disposable raincoats – momentary cover. Why was this raincoat stuck to the skin?

Then, in the midst of this crisis, Gary Kimble returned. He walked into the salon to find her.

“Did you speak to my folks?” she asked.

“I told them all about you and they said that you seemed to have changed,” he said. “But I told them that it was for the better, and that you were happy.”

“I am now,” she said. It was the truth. The beginning of the truth.

They had to be together. She left early. They walked together and went out for a meal. She told him how she felt about him, and how she had longed for his return – all true. He told her his thoughts. Every word seemed to bring her joy.

She went back to his motel room. They kissed with passion. She slipped off her dress, and her bra, and he took her breasts in his hands and worshipped them. She gasped. Surely, he would forgive what was to follow. This was love, or so it seemed.

Gary thought it too. But perhaps he was not the man she thought he was.

He was proud to be considered black and white. It helped him to be a good investigator. There is truth and there are lies. There are criminals and there are good people, men and women. He was not prone to violence, but that was because he had been able to control his short temper with logic. Emotion is the enemy of logic – it breaks it down.

His horror switched to rage in an instant. Before he even knew it the lifeless body of Bea lay limp on the bed, the pretty face lifeless, the beautiful hair spread across the pillow, the perfect breasts becoming pale like polished marble, and the end of his dreams staring at him from her groin.

For fleeting moment after his anger subsided, he wondered about how to restage the scene, but there was no way out of this but the truth. That was the way it should be.

It was over a year later that he started to rethink things. He made a call from his prison cell. He still wanted to resolve the case he had been working on before he committed that murder in the second degree, the investigation that stopped when he was arrested. He asked that the DNA be checked and it was a match.

But there was no satisfaction. If only she had been a woman. Maybe he would have married her despite all that she had done. Maybe?

The End

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Authors’s Note: This story is loosely based on a film I saw called “Taking Lives” where a serial killer assumed the identity of the people that he killed, brought back to mind having watched “Don’t Fuck with Cats” on Netflix.