The Accidental Soprano

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

They said that I was fortunate that the injury did not cause lasting damage, but that was before it changed my life. I am not bitter towards the surgeons that repaired my neck. I have used surgeons since, and I am grateful to them. Surgeons have to do what they do to let us live, or to normal lives.

It was a case of exploding glass. I held up my hands to me face and that was untouched, but two shards went into my neck and did some damage to my voice box. A normal life requires a voice, and the surgeons knew that. In the moment the repairs seemed simple, even if it meant stretching the vocal chords. At least I would be able to talk.

For a while they discouraged me from speaking. I had the chance to recover from the wounds. But then I opened my mouth and the squeaky voice came out. I was horrified, but I could see my so-called friend Gabe sniggering. I would have laughed out loud myself had it been any other guy. I sounded like a cartoon chipmunk.

“Don’t worry about that,” the surgeon said. “We will get you some speech therapy, but we had little tissue to work with, so your voice may be a little higher long term, but you can speak.”

A little higher? I went through the speech therapy, and they spoke about ways to modulate my voice, but they could not change the vocal range. I was a soprano, but even sopranos have a low range – I didn’t. I thought that I sounded like a 10 year old boy, and the modulation only made me sound like a 15 year old girl.

Apart from my family and Gabe who was the only one to visit me in hospital, nobody knew so when I was discharged I pretended to be temporarily mute, rather than speak with that voice. I carried a slate with me that I could write things down. I hoped that in time my voice would get lower.

At home I would squeak out to my parents and my brother and sister, and Gran and Aunt Mary when they visited, and we all got used to it. And I would call Gabe and talk to him.

“This is not good pal,” he said. “You need to get out. You walk around with that slate and people think you are a freak. You can talk - you just sound like a chick. Actually sometimes over the phone it is like talking to a girl.”

“Is it really? Like having a real girlfriend?” I was teasing him. He was not good with girls, and neither was I, but now I had no chance. What girl would go out with a guy that sounded like me.

I suppose that I learned to understand that if I spoke over the phone to somebody I didn’t know and introduced myself as Sam, then they assumed that I was Samantha. The first time that it happened I did correct the person at the other end, but it got very complicated very fast.

“You’re male? How old are you kid? Do your parents know that you are buying online?”

I was just easier to let them think that I was female. I soon discovered that people, men and women, speak to you differently if they think that you are female. Men can be flirty but that makes them try harder to please, and women think you are one of them and need help and understanding. My squeakiness had advantages. I suppose that I picked up a feminine telephone manner. It was not deliberate – it was just that being unable to speak in public I just got to use the phone more regularly and that meant being “Sammy” the bright and smart young woman on the other end of the phone.

I told Gabe and he insisted that I should speak like her with him. I didn’t like the idea, but I humored him. But after a few conversations things started to get weird.

“You sound like you are a really nice girl, Sammy,” said Gabe. “If only we could meet sometime? Maybe go out to a club or something – just you and me?”

The idea of going out seemed good, but I would be me, with my slate around my neck. “What is wrong with you, Gabe!” I squealed like a girl. It was always worse when I just blurted something out. It was like a soprano screeching out a top F, something that the voice therapist had told me was “in the whistle zone” – the highest notes achievable. It minded me how ridiculous I sounded, and I was starting to wonder if I might every go out again.

I had not even been able to go out to get my haircut since the accident. It just seemed like something that would be hard to do even if you can’t talk, and you can’t even use your slate under the smock. I was looking in the mirror and wondering if I was starting to even look like what I sounded like – like a giant squeaking child or even a girl.

My parents had arranged for me to consider legal action arising from my accident, and while all the material had been in writing until that point, it was suggested that I go in to visit the lawyer. Because of my voice I didn’t want to do it.

“But you say that your high voice has ruined your life,” said my father. “They need to hear it. They need to understand how bad it sounds.”

“It is really not that bad,” said my mother – she didn’t want me to dwell on it.

But she took me in to see the lawyers my father had arranged. They were very surprised at the voice I had and asked for details of the impact on my life. It seemed as if they doubted that I had much of chance of getting much in the way of compensation. I told them that I sounded like a woman, and over the phone I had virtually become a woman as it was easier to do that and not be a freak.

“So you have been forced to change gender,” one lawyer said. “That sounds like bucket loads of damages to me. Is that the reason for the long hair? Do you have to wear a dress to go out?”

It seemed like such a stupid thing for a supposedly intelligent man to say, but it got me thinking about Gabe’s offer to go clubbing. I was going stir crazy. I wanted step outside without the slate and sing along to the dance music.

“It seems like the only way I can lead a normal life,” I said. It was not a lie. I never said I did it. The lawyers scribbled down notes and said that they would need “evidence of distress”, whatever that might be.

One of the people I spoke regularly with over the phone was my speech therapist, Hannah. I told her about my friend’s idea to pretend to be a girl just to get out and be able to talk to strangers. Her reply bowled me over.

“I have had the opposite problem to you, and it has taken me years to develop my voice, and help others to do the same,” she said. “I’m a transwoman, Sammy. I was born a man and I transitioned to being female only after my voice had broken. Actually it was after I had been married to a woman to my wife for over a year that I felt compelled to change my sex to match my gender. I thought that a male voice would stop me from ever talking to strangers, but I fixed it. It would seem easier to change the voice to match the person than to change the person to match the voice, but I have to say, after trying everything, we have not made much progress. If you want to have a go, I can help, but it would just be oncer. Changing gender is serious. I know.”

I never would have guessed that she was transgender. She looked female to me. She was not ravishingly beautiful or anything like that, and she did not try to dress up, but she looked like a woman to me, and nothing like a man.

“Okay. An experiment,” I said. “Could you help me?”

“I am not sure why, but have kept a lot of my transition wardrobe,” she said. “You could come around to my place on the day you go out. But I will need to show you some things when you come in for your next appointment. You sound like a girl and I know that I can make you look like a girl, but if you want to pass you will need a crash course in acting like a girl.”

I called Gabe and asked him whether he would like to go on a date with Sammy.

“Seriously?” Then suddenly he sounded less keen. “What will you look like. Like, I don’t want to appear gay or anything.”

“A friend is helping to get me ready,” I told him. “I can send the address and you can decide. If I don’t look good enough I won’t want to go out either, so you can decide on the day.”

My next session with Hannah at the outpatient clinic was nothing about the voice, and everything about passing as a woman. There were so many things to be aware of, and the changes in behavior needed to be subtle so that I did not come off as some kind of under-dressed drag queen. It helped that Hannah was such a great teacher. For her it was all about behavior and voice, and beauty was only for outside work.

Practice was needed, and that would be in the privacy of my own home. But that was where I spent my time. I was able to practice all my feminine moves again and again, almost until they became second nature.

The only other thing she had me do was to shave my entire body in the shower on the Saturday morning. It felt strange but not unpleasant to be smooth all over. Somehow it made me feel that I was slipping into a female form already.

Hannah picked me after lunch and took me to her place. I sent the address to Gabe, but told him to come around early in the evening. We had work to do.

“I hate wigs but luckily you have enough hair to work with,” said Hannah. “I know what to do, and I know how to get the unwanted hairs off your face, but first we need to get you a feminine body shape. I said that I could help you because we are about the same size, you and me, and before I had this body of mine shaped by hormones and surgery, I had tucking and padding, and this is what it looks like.

I struggled into the garment that she produced and saw how the top of the garment could turn the small amount of flesh on my chest into an acceptable cleavage. Hannah said that I could attend the ladies’ restroom in this outfit, so long as I understood how to do it.

She had a dress too. It was the kind of thing that any girl would wear to a club if they had a body to show off.

“Now you do,” she said. “Now let’s do your hair and makeup. I’ll do myself first so you can see how it is done. It so happens that my boyfriend is taking me out tonight as well.”

“I thought you said that you had a wife?” I said.

“That was when I was a guy,” she said, as if it should be obvious. “Things change when you change. I am waiting for a proposal. It might be tonight. He is married so it will take a while, but we are in love. It makes me so happy to be a woman.”

After she had finished I thought that a proposal would be a certainty. She looked truly beautiful. It seemed amazing what a bouncy hairdo and some makeup could do. Could it do the same for me? It turned out that the answer was yes.

Just seeing myself changed everything. It had all seemed like a joke up until that point, but now it seemed suddenly serious. There was a woman in the mirror. She was young and pretty, and the fact that she had a voice higher than many women did not seem out of place. In fact, it suited the look. Here was a girl who had an innocent childlike face framed by playful curls, on a sexy body, and the voice seemed perfect.

There was a knock on the door and Hannah went to open it and usher Gabe inside.

“Hello, my name is Gabe, and you must be Hannah? And your friend is …? Where’s Sam?” He seemed serious.

“Sammy. It’s Sammy,” I said. He knew the voice.

“You’re kidding?” His mouth fell open. “Wow. There is no risk of anybody thinking you not a girl in that outfit!”

“You kids should head out then,” said Hannah. “I am waiting for my date, but he shouldn’t be long.”

So that was our first date, Gabe and me. It was hard to describe how everything was so different. I knew him only as a pal, but suddenly I rediscovered him as a man, just as he discovered me as a woman.

I discovered that I had a voice too. I sang myself horse on the dancefloor that night, but I tried not to drink too much – it is simply not ladylike and that is how I try to be these days.

The lawyers were successful in getting an out of court settlement arising out of my injury. They were able to convince the Defendants lawyers that the injury they were responsible had changed my life for the worse, even though I learned that the very opposite of what it did.

Still the winnings paid for me to go back under the surgeon’s knife. No, not to fix the voice box but to fix everything else to match the voice I have.

Gabe approves. So do I. Hannah and I are both looking at wedding dresses.

The End

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Erin’s seed: “A man has a neck injury and even after voice therapy he is stuck with a woman's voice. Getting tired of being teased about this, he adopts a female persona …”