Niqab

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Yaron said that it was the walk which gave the boy away, but as soon as I grabbed the arm of this niqab wearing “woman” I knew that something was wrong. It was not that it was a man’s arm underneath the black fabric – the arm was slim and soft – but it was trembling. I immediately placed my hand in the small of her back, and I felt the packages.

Israeli army training took over. There was a door nearby recessed into the plastered block wall. The rule is that a bomber should be removed to a place where the blast can be contained. I bundled the shrouded figure into this gap with such force that the heavy door at the other end which was not bolted, burst open. We tumbled into a small courtyard. Yaron followed.

“I will call for help,” he said. I looked around. The courtyard was small but could shield the street from shrapnel.

“No,” I said. “Let us see what we have here first. Shut the door behind us. Protect everybody in the marketplace.”

I still thought that this was a woman. She had large dark eyes that her shock made even bigger. That may have given me reason to pause, but I could also see that the hands were empty of any trigger, and they were both open above her head as she lay. The first thing to do was to pull away the sleeves and disable any trigger. I found it and pulled it away.

I could see that the arms had just a small amount of dark hair. I pulled away the hood and mask. This was not a woman at all. It was a young man. A very scared young man. His eyes were becoming moist. His head, crown with a huge mop of dark curly hair, quivered. Barely a teenager, I thought, but looking younger even than that, in his fear.

Yaron had a knife and he ripped the rest of the garment to reveal the bomb vest.

“This must be the prettiest boy I have ever seen,” said Yaron. He had his rifle trained on the boy’s face, with the muzzle getting closer. It was not something that I would have said, but he was right.

The all covering burka is illegal on the streets of Israel, but out of respect Muslim women are allowed to wear the niqab. It reveals the eyes, and that is intended to make it hard for Muslim men to disguise themselves as women for nefarious purposes. But here was a young man who looked like a woman in a niqab, and properly would have passed as one in an almira where the whole face can be seen. There was something about the walk that made Yaron tell me that this person was not female, but I was not so sure. I reached down to check his groin.

“That is right Amos,” said Yaron. “Tear off his balls. If he wants to dress as a woman, make him a woman.

I have to say that I was disappointed to confirm that he was not female. If he had been maybe my life would be less complicated.

“He is very young,” I said. “It would seem cruel to deprive him of a life.”

“He is a murderer,” said Yaron. “He is an Arab and a murderer. He wants all Jews dead, you and I included.” He used the knife in his hand to cut the webbing of the bomb vest from the boy. I moved to hold his arms. He was not struggling.

“C4 with nails and glass packed around,” said Yaron. “This could have killed or maimed scores of people.”

“Please don’t kill me,” the boy said in good Hebrew.

Yaron had cut the webbing with ease. The knife was sharp, and still in Yaron’s grip. Before I could see what he was doing and before the boy could even react, Yaron had pulled down the boy’s underpants and at a stoke emptied his scrotum.

The boy screamed. It was like a girl’s scream.

“What have you done?!” I said.

“Like you said. Give him a life. He can wear his niqab now any time he likes. He is not a man anymore.”

I had a dressing on my belt, as well all do. I opened it and the boy held it to his bleeding groin.

Before he stood up, Yaron picked up the two testicles and threw them over the wall and into the street

“What now?” I said. “We might have stood a chance if we could repair the injury done. But I am not going outside to rummage in the dust for two balls. What will we tell the Commander? We found a bomber and we castrated him?”

“Why not?”

“Because this is an Arab town, or this part of it is. We are walking a knife edge here. We are on a war footing here – remember.”

“Maybe we should just kill him?”

“We might have to,” I said, and I am ashamed to admit it.

“Please Sir, don’t kill me,” the boy said. “I will tell nobody. Let me live, even if as less than a man. You need to get me to a doctor.”

“I am a doctor.” The voice came from behind us. We had not noticed that a man was standing there. It was the owner of the house. A man who identified himself as Ehud Hageron, and he said that he was a retired physician – a surgeon in fact. But he was also a witness to our crimes, and he was a man who had committed his life to doing no harm.

Our crimes because I had held the boy while Yaron used his knife. I could say that I had no time to stop him, but that is not what soldiers do. We protect the man beside us. It is the second rule of soldiering, after ‘follow orders without dispute’. Backing your comrade in arms is everything.

We were both in trouble here, and now I could see that Yaron was worried too. He said the Ehud: “Just stop the bleeding and we will take him out of your home. We will take him into custody.”

He shot a glance at me. It was not a wink exactly, but I read it. He was saying that we needed to bundle the boy away from witnesses and kill him.

By this time Ehud was examining the wound. Without looking up he said: “This is serious. You are not taking him anywhere. Bring him to my surgery.”

Beside the entrance to his courtyard was a building that had served as his shopfront. The external entrance that had once served the public had been blocked up but otherwise it appeared to be normal doctor’s consulting rooms – a waiting room with a reception desk and his office with a desk and chairs and high bed for examinations and surgery. It was dusty as if not used for many years. We placed the boy there.

Out of the doctor’s hearing I told Yaron: “You collect the bomb vest. We may need to find a way to destroy it. We cannot tell anybody what has happened here. Whatever we are going to do with the boy, we will need to do it after dark.”

“We could have got a medal, or maybe even a promotion,” said Yaron. “We stopped a bomber”.

“And then you cut his balls off,” I said. “Now look where we are.”

He left and Ehud asked me whether I could help him. He had been speaking with the boy on the table in Arabic. I am a Western Jew so I had no idea, but it sounded as if Ehud was fluent. It seemed that while this was an Arab town recently settled, that this was a Jewish doctor who had lived and worked in this community for some time. To be accepted in this way seemed remarkable, but to retire and stay living here, incredible.

I had the Israeli army combat first aid training only, but I was ready, and perhaps more able than many in my unit. I agreed to help. I washed while he talked to the boy.

It was obvious that this young man was deeply distressed and he had every right to be. With the fearful glances at me it seemed that he had an idea what might be in store for him. Ehud put a hard on his should and spoke to him firmly and clearly, and the boy was weeping but nodding.

“I cannot use general anaesthetic in the place,” said Ehud. “But I have explained to him what I propose to do to save his life, and I can use local anaesthesia and a sedative.”

“Is this injury deadly?” I had a sudden thought that we might find a way to just let him die. I am not that kind of person, but I knew the trouble we were in.

“No,” said Ehud. “The bleeding has slowed. The genitals receive a large blood flow, but the loss of blood will not kill him – you will. You and the other soldier. Unless this boy remains forever silent. And I have explained to him how I might be able to guarantee that silence.”

“I don’t want to kill anybody,” I said. It was true. I did not hate the Arabs as perhaps Yaron did.

“This boy says that he did not want to kill either, other than that he was happy to die, but not for his faith. He is homosexual. He wanted to kill himself. He accepted the vest but intended to use it only on himself.”

“So how does this guarantee his silence?”

“The surgery that I will do will silence him. Your friend said to him that if he wore the niqab he should be a woman, just before he cut away his manhood. I have suggested that if he does just that then he can never speak. He will sign a consent to a genital feminization procedure which I will perform that right here, with your help. It will prove that the injury is self-inflicted. You and your colleague will be in the clear. He will need to face his family. He may never wear anything but the niqab. He will never be a man again. You committed no crime. Destroy the bomb and he will have committed no crime. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Were there holes in this plan? Probably, but I was ready to do anything to avoid killing this boy in cold blood. Perhaps I had been prepared to when I consider that he was a fundamentalist Muslim ready to kill Jews and even fellow Arabs, but now that I heard another story, it seemed to match the person lying on the gurney table and staring at me. I knew that the Palestinians were not accepting of gay men.

“What do I have to do?” I asked.

“We will operate now, and he can sign when he recovers,” said Ehud. He went to wash up.

“My friend made a mistake,” I said to the boy. “Because of that we can let you go free, provided that you forget all about us. Do you understand.”

Maybe he detected that Hebrew was my second language, but he answered me in perfect English: “As a man who has become a woman, I will have no right to say anything.”

“What is your name?” I asked him.

“Whatever name you give me. After this I must carry a woman’s name.”

“Miriam,” I said. That was the woman I saw when I looked down on her, with her big dark eyes and that mass of black curls.

Ehud came over and gave his patient a sedative injection, and then put a series of jabs around the injured area. We needed to wait for these to take effect, but not too long. Then Ehud went to work.

He pulled the penis down across the wound almost as far as the anus, and used the loose skin on is side to fix it is place with surgical glue. Then he took the two bleeding edges of the scrotum and stitched them together over the penis, and then used threats to create folds with concealed the seam. It was a simple operation. Not a sex change, but a concealment of the penis using an empty scrotum in a manner that allowed for an apparent opening and for urination downwards.

Miriam looked on at times raising the head to watch, but the sedation made her appear disinterested.

I was pulling off the surgical gloves when Yaron knocked on the door. “I will go back to the barracks and then come back in civilian clothes in an hour. Then you can go back a check and re-join me here until dark,” he said through the door.

I opened it. He had the bomb packed tightly into a bag. We could put that with ordnance disposal later. It would be blown to pieces with other dangerous material, leaving no trace.

“We have a solution,” I said. “There was no bomber. The boy is transsexual. Meet Miriam”. I pointed to the person lying on the gurney table.

“What?” said Yaron.

“The doctor can explain,” I said. “But we will have a copy of the consent to an operation that will ensure that nobody will ever know what we did today. Now I will go first and check in my weapons. I will be back here in an hour and then you can finish for the day.”

“But what are we going to do about … her?” he asked.

I walked past him. I took the bomb from his hand and I left the courtyard. Outside I looked around for people who might be there looking for their young suicide bomber. It could have been this man or that pair, who can say? All Arabs look like potential killers. We all need to know that.

We patrol in pairs and alone in that environment you feel naked, but I was leaving, and that was good. When I came back, I wore the Bedouin scarf that I had in my locker as a joke, around my neck. Rather than pass for an Arab, I might pass as a western tourist. Part time soldiers like me can blend in when out of Israeli army uniform. A western Jew more easily than others, perhaps.

It was more than an hour later before I got back, and Yaron was keen to go.

“Are you in agreement?” I asked him. “Has Miriam signed? If so we can take an image of the consent form. We can let her go.”

“It seems easy for you to say she and her the way you do,” said Yaron. “That’s a guy.”

“Is she?” I said angrily. “Isn’t she what you made her?” Yaron was responsible, and I was upset.

I was glad to see him leave. His impetuous behavior had almost turned me into a murderer, or if not that then in jail for maiming somebody. Israel is a civilized country. Not even the army can get away with that, even in our own backyard.

I was there to keep watch over Miriam as our prisoner. She had signed the documents, but Ehud had suggested that he go out into the town to try to find out more. He would take teas with some Muslim friends on the square, to try to learn more.

When he returned he had bad news for Miriam.

“They know that I am Jewish, so I don’t learn everything, but they are talking about you having let down your people. You are not going to be welcomed with open arms, even if you walked in intact. I suspect that you might be in more danger with your own people than you would be with the authorities!”

There were tears in Miriam’s eyes. I almost felt like crying myself. The only whole in our plan was our assumption that a transsexual Arab girl could simply go home. Now she had nowhere to go. She would die anyway, despite all my efforts, and Ehud’s.

She turned towards me. Those eyes I had thought were so big, full of fear now despair, seemed to captivate me.

“You had better come with me,” I said.

“Not in the niqab,” said Ehud. “My daughter is living in Europe but I have a few of her things. There is a dress, and sandals and something to wear in the hair and in the ears. Let me go and find it.”

He left us alone. For the first time I was alone with Miriam. I took her hand as she lay on the bed. She looked at me but she said nothing. It was those eyes that spoke. They told me that she would be forever grateful for saving her life; they told me that her past was gone forever and that her future was going to be in a sex and a culture that would be entirely foreign to her; they told me that she was ready to be herself.

She needed a few days to recover before she left that place. In that time the bomb was destroyed and Yaron’s silence had been tested but remained solid. He did not need to know that Miriam had not returned to her people and kept her vow of silence. I just needed to keep secret from him the fact that I had a houseguest until I was ready to leave Israel and return to America.

When I did leave, I took with me my girl Miriam. It was easy to get her papers as an Arab girl, and even an Israeli passport so long as she ticked the box to say: “Leaving Israel permanently”.

She needed corrective surgery when we got home to build a vagina. She wanted it as much as I did.

It was a secular wedding ceremony. I am a western Jew, and she is a Muslim Arab, but these are only descriptions of us that are not relevant to us anymore. We are man and wife. That is all I want us to be.

The End

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Author’s Note:

I received a few ideas for inclusion in my War Stories Collection from Eric, which included reference to a story called “The Monster” about the Arab/Israeli conflict. I have not read that story but the idea of a tale based on that ongoing war spawned this.