

## The Minister's Rose

Marya was driving on a sunny Saturday morning in early Fall, chasing yard sale signs, when she stopped suddenly: ESTATE SALE TODAY. It wasn't the sign that made her stop so suddenly, but the location.

Marya had driven by this lovely home time and time again, and had often waved at the old couple sitting on the front porch swing. And this estate sale could mean one of two things: either one or both of the older folks had passed away or they were now placed in a nursing home. She was sad to lose them, and knew they were sad to leave their home, either way. They hadn't been like other folks who sit on their porches and wave, and she had often wondered what they were talking about, among long silences, sitting there. They had both seemed introspective and lonely, sitting together. The two-story house was a stately red brick with a cement front porch, leaded windows, an elegant doorway, very simple lines, very solid, and she had seen the glow of a chandelier inside. She had felt drawn to go and talk to them many times, but didn't quite know how to do that. They had always seemed surprised that anyone would wave back at them anymore, and now they were gone.

There was a huge crowd of cars jammed along the road on both sides and in the driveway, so that it would cause some minor negotiations for folks to be able to leave. Marya had to park way down the street, but she liked that, walking along the old sidewalk in this neighborhood on a sunny day – what a treat! It was a day with bright blue sky and fluffy clouds and a wind that encourages one to take deep breaths full of sunshine. But as she got closer to the house she started to sense the rush and frenzy of the place now, and the way that an estate sale can feel when it is handled by a company: business, prices, deals on the last hours of the last day. The old couple seemed lost in the midst of their environs with all these people sorting through their belongings. She could remember their faces and their skinny arms waving. She was determined to remember to respect their memory as she entered their space. She could feel all this as she got closer to the house, one more house to go, and then the hum of voices chattering. As she stepped onto the grass of their front lawn in between oddly parked cars, she felt a warmth for the couple and held it close to her.

The cement steps were braced with two cement lions with price tags on them. Well, this was the start of it. The porch was perfectly clean, and she stopped to look to her right at the wooden porch swing, perfectly still. She remembered the woman had sat on a chair to the left of the swing, with a walker in front of her, and the man had sat on the swing. Two men swung the door wide, carrying a large pine trunk between them and laughing as they walked on by her, and the estate

salesman encouraged them to come back for more later on in the week and said goodbye to them and hello to her. “Everything’s fifty percent off today – but if you see something you like we can make a deal.”

The house was swarming with all kinds of people and it took a while for Marya to feel the energy of the real home, the real place she was in. She had a sense that this front area was used to visitors, and as she walked to the dining area past the front parlor she saw the chandelier and stood staring at it. She suddenly flashed on elegant dinner parties but this didn’t seem to match the couple she had seen. But when she started looking around, she indeed saw heavy candelabra, simple but elegant, heavy vases, well chosen artwork. Delicate bone china with a fine gilt line, crystal pieces for serving, buffet trays with warming equipment.

She overheard a man who must have been the son of the couple saying that his father had been a minister and that made sense: that they would have entertained as part of their church functions, a wealthy church, but restrained wealth, which explained why the pieces were so heavy, but refined so as not to be a display, gaudy. Still, it was a bit much for Marya, who had very simple tastes, and who began to feel something strange about the dinner parties, a tension in the room. She moved around the tables and saw an overabundance of pieces of crystal arranged from large to tiny. And then, among the tiniest crystal salt bowls she saw two odd pieces: a delicate porcelain bowl hand painted with pink roses, and an unusual pink box. She picked up the box and it fit into the palm of her hand, but it weighed nicely there. It was covered in a dusky damask rose fabric, with aged brocade trim around the lip where the two halves of the box met. The top was decorated with a silk miniature rosebud surrounded by pale open faced pink and white flowers so that the rosebud seemed to rise up from a bouquet. Pink lace encircled the flowers, and three pieces of cutwork metal that may have come from an old piece of vintage jewelry made three points like leaves or hands around the top. She opened the box and was delighted to find that it was made of two halves of terra cotta, warm and brown and soft like skin under the soft rose coverings. She closed it and it made a soft whispering sound. She turned it over to find that even the base was framed with a circle of eighteen lace rounds. And thus the box became part of her life the way other pieces from yard sales had. It became part of her hand, the way a lost bird finds sanctuary after the storm. She had an impression of the woman, that this had been a gift from the man, and that he had given it to her to make up for something. That the woman had treasured it. It seemed to be the finest thing in the room. She felt that it had once been on the woman’s dresser.

She had a sense that they had moved like chess pieces among the carefully appointed finery, that discussions there were like negotiations about religious

definitions, God's Will, and politics as it related to God's Will. She had a sense that the woman had been quiet and that the man had ruled the table. That a few people had discussed but that mostly he had quietly ruled the truth at the table. That the guests would have had coffee in the parlor and then gone, and the light would fall from the table. That the next morning the things would be put away and the reality of the couple's lives would come out from under the surfaces of the crystal and the china, come back out from the shadows. She had a sense that they were happy, but that there was a tension there that she couldn't define. She stared at the chandelier for a long time, with its metal curves and points, that dripped with a certain number of crystal prisms, again, the perfect amount, restrained but powerful.

Marya moved to the kitchen, away from what now seemed to be the dining room where the man and the woman had entertained not for pleasure but for some kind of social ritual, for deacons or for ... she wasn't sure. But it didn't seem like where the couple had been real. She was immediately struck with the sense that this was where the couple had been happy, at this small cozy solid dinette table, white with silver flecks and a wide aluminum trim. A soft green paint on the walls and a lot of light filling the room from a window to the right and from the door at the back of the house. This was where the woman was happy with the man, where she was comfortable, with her clear glass bowls and cheerful simple yellows and greens for dishes, a few remnants of the fifties and seventies, a little harvest brown, a little mod, but she had again chosen carefully and tossed what she didn't need, for the collection wasn't sloppy: clear, simple. Marya was drawn this time to a stack of clear glass mixing bowls, the perfect size for a bowl of cereal, or for whisking eggs or making a sauce: two of them matching with inch-wide lips, and one on top that matched in size but had a softer finer lip. She placed the rosebud box inside the three glass bowls and took in a deep breath of the woman and the man when they were in the kitchen. She remembered them on the porch, and she now knew them here. This was where they were real, where their spirits met. She felt that they had both lived in the country, had grown up there, and that the layers of finery and responsibility had been acquired, required, and she now saw that the restraint and elegance had come from this simplicity of spirit emanating from the woman in the kitchen, for she would have chosen the pieces, with the man's approval of course. He had encouraged her to seek something finer than she would have chosen, but she stayed within her own understanding of elegance.

Marya stepped into the hallway behind the kitchen and immediately felt tension, a crossroads and indecision, not coming from her, but from a crossing of spaces that were far away from the centered clarity and the powerful refinement of the front part of the house. All of it fell away abruptly and currents of energy literally bombarded her from different directions: to her right she could see the door to

the outside and back yard, which was strewn with an enormous amount of things in disorder, to her left was a dark steep stairway which spiralled with something she felt foreboding about, and straight ahead was a bathroom and bedroom which sent her waves of sadness and loss. Marya was a bit overwhelmed to find that her sense of the couple was so far off, because these three directional currents were far more than she had initially sensed. So, these were the undercurrents of tension that she had felt in the dining room, that the acoutrements were a show for others but that they were a powerful façade that fell away as the guests left and the pieces were put back on their shelves.

Marya decided to confront the darkest area first, because she sensed that it would help unravel the other two currents of loss and disarray. The dark energy hit her like a block or a wall almost pushing her back with every step she took up the stairs. As if this was a space that was not to be entered by anyone, as if it were being violated by these strangers with their labels and calculators and curious hands and eyes. The steps were wooden and the walls were of a dark wood also and the rails were smooth wood lines on either side. She had to hold onto the railing to make sure this energy didn't knock her down, but she did so not with fear but with caution, with a memory of the man with his lost lonely pondering eyes behind his skinny arm, waving on the porch, and the woman slumped lower behind her walker, slower to wave than the man.

The room at the top of the stairs was filled with dark bound books, hundreds of them lining a large table the size of a pool table to her right, lining bookshelves around the walls. The books seemed snapped shut. Ordinarily books seemed to jump at her with their energy, but these books seemed like ones you would find in a scientific library, inaccessible. Marya lifted her eyes and laughed to find a four by five foot, black and white photograph of Bette Davis in a very sultry pose, very sexual, and her dark smoky eyes looking at Marya across the books as if to say, "put the books down, darling, put the books down and come to ME." She laughed again at the contrast with the coldness coming from the very shut books. To the right of the photograph was an erotic modern painting of a nude woman's torso, without a head, without legs below the thighs, in soft blues and purples and whites. Marya began to get the sense that this was the man's private space, which is why there was such a sense of pushing her away as she had come up the stairs. This was a place where the man had come to be alone, she thought, to read, and to fantasize about Bette Davis.

Marya was curious about the books now and began to scan the titles. She had never seen so many book titles with the word "Bible" in them in her life. None of them sent any energy to her, of spirit, of life, and Marya was not devoid of religious or spiritual curiosity or study. These were textbooks. The man had taken

his ministry very seriously, had been a scholar of a dry sort, possibly with a perspective that was very rigid in its judgement of God's Will. Her sense of the closedness of the books was as if each book drew a thick black line around the minister's belief system, each one confirming it and reinforcing it as if each one were a literal witness to the tenets of his faith. But surely, surely, Marya thought, he had to read for fun as well, and she continued to scan the book titles, going around the silent table until she found one book that had been reversed so that the title could not be read. Marya lifted it, as darkly bound as all the others, and turned it so that she could read it and laughed deeply, as she read the title: "The Sexual Perversions of Women". This was an unexpected twist that made her grin, and Marya looked up as other people came and went and all of the black books made one big black box in front of her on the table, with Bette Davis behind her and the book in her hand. The box had been too tight, but he had insisted on it for himself and his wife and for others. The dinners under the restrained luxury of the dining room and the parlor made sense now. He had seen his ministry as a way of keeping the lines, of keeping the box intact, but secretly he feared women's sexuality, and adored its raw embodiment in the form of Bette Davis, in the form of woman herself, upstairs in his secret room. This is why his energy had pushed her so hard on the stairs. He didn't want anyone to know that he also felt the box too tightly. Marya shook her head. She believed in a more natural acceptance of sexuality and a balance between spirituality and the desires of the body, that repression itself would lead to the very disorders possibly wrongly diagnosed in the book she held in her hand.

Maybe that was why his eyes were so lost and so longing, so searching, as she had seen them from the porch. He had wanted more than the box, but was afraid to allow it. Marya put the book back, but she didn't reverse it; she made it as readable as all the other books lined there.

All of the other people had gone downstairs and Marya was alone. She looked into the room to her right and found a dusty study where obviously pieces of furniture had been removed, for there were gaping holes and outlines from where the pieces had been stroked by light each day, leaving distinct color differences on the wood panelling. This is where he had read and studied. It was very dry. It had nothing of the clarity and light that she had felt in the kitchen. She thought about the duality of some religions, where the spirit is seen as something that is not of the body, not of the Earth. This room had been a study of that dissociated, dissected Spirit, where the body is suspect, the Earth is a temptation and chaos. No energy came from this room. A roll top desk with the top rolled down was marked "Not for Sale" had obviously been too heavy and difficult to move until the books in the next room were gone. It seemed like an anchor to a boat that had never sailed.

Marya was sad for the man as she left the study and walked past the books to explore the rest of the man's private space. She was glad the man had allowed himself the Bette Davis poster and the woman's soft torso with its blues and purples and whites. She turned right into the next room and was absolutely startled by what she found. There was an enormous bed with a deep red bedspread that was as smooth and luscious as a big red tongue, catty-cornered to the door! Above it was a five by seven foot dark wood carving of a Spanish scene with pair of Flamenco dancers, with musicians and onlookers. This is what the man had not wanted anyone to see! Marya grinned widely and looked around the room until her eyes fell on some unframed artwork strewn on a red upholstered bench to the right of the bed. She picked up the pieces and giggled, because the top piece was a painting of a topless blonde cowgirl with a shiny pistol and rope for lassoing! Marya couldn't stop herself from giggling now and she was glad that she was the only one upstairs at the moment. A cowgirl no less. The other pieces were flowers and landscapes, no more cowgirls. She put the pieces back down and felt that she should leave the room. As she walked down the stairs she felt the reverse, that the energy was pushing her down, and again with caution and not fear, but this time with mirth, she held onto the railing. She wondered if the minister had ever asked his wife to join him upstairs in the wild red bedroom. She didn't have the sense that that had happened very often, and remembered the rosebud box, soft, virginal, pure, and that she had had the sense that the man had given it to his wife because he was sorry for something. The woman's spirit loomed as a pure sadness, unopened and wrapped within the center of the rosebud. She really had no idea, but she sensed that the energy that had pushed her away and back down the stairs had also included the minister's wife. It was his space and she had not been upstairs with him often.

At the bottom of the stairs Marya looked again into the kitchen with its warmth and sincere purity, wholeness. Yes, the woman had been happy there. She sighed for the woman and the man, each locked into patterns that made them lonely and lost, surprised that anyone would wave at them on the porch, parts of each of them left unfulfilled at their old age.

She looked at the frenzy of people searching through the piles of things on the lawn along the driveway leading back to the double garage and shed. She looked at one or two of the piles through the doorway and none of them seemed from a distance to have the same refinement and taste as she had seen in the dining room or kitchen. She decided to leave that exploration for last and turned to the bathroom, which was equipped with rails for bathing. Waves of sadness and a smell that she remembered from visiting her aging relatives came from the bathroom. She turned to the bedroom and felt an implosion in her heart. This was the woman's room, as if the man had not been here in very long time. She had no sense

at all of the man in here. The bedspread was a worn pale yellow floral and the pillows were limp. The dresser was gone, the closets empty and trash on the floor. There were no lamps on the bedside tables. The whole room seemed very dirty and soft and decaying moment to moment. Still, it was a sweet sense of decay, a natural one, and the woman's spirit seemed to welcome the company. Marya's eyes fell on a hatbox at the foot of the bed and she moved closer to look through it. Marya loved old hats, which gave her memories of her great Aunt who had adored her hat collection and had had great fun when she was allowed to play dress up with friends. There were four hats left, or there had only been four hats, she didn't know which. There was a solid white one made of straw and shaped like a bathing cap, with subtle flowers woven in. A china blue one that looked very French, one that would have been a shaped accent, barely a hat, but with lovely curves. A navy blue one that was formal and a proper hat, with an elegant label from a long gone hatmaker in New York City. And a somewhat silly hat, yellow with red flowers with black centers, a fun hat with a little bit of a brim and a square shape. Marya remembered the woman sitting behind the walker, slumped down, slow to wave. She had been a sweet woman, but very alone, isolated here, sharing her spirit more in the bright clear kitchen than here in this sweet soft space that was hers, or upstairs in the polarized minister's loft.

Marya became aware of the estate sale again, of people focused on the items in the dining room and parlor, and she avoided it to go to the back of the house again to the lawn. As she stepped through the back door, which had that flavor belying the country where perhaps they had come from, the sunlight and sky and clouds and breeze filled her and refreshed her energy after so much sensing of the lives of the minister and his wife. As she walked along the things piled up on the lawn she realized why she had had such a rush of disorder and chaos from this direction, for indeed much of it was absolute junk, worthless, damaged, but not thrown away, not repaired, rotting junk. It must have been stacked up high in the garage for decades and then only lately pulled out, falling apart as they pulled it. People were looking through it not to buy anything but out of a morbid curiosity.

As Marya got closer to the garage the piles started to gain in value and she began seeing green trunk after green trunk, each marked with military numbering, very old. She wondered if the minister had in fact worked as a military priest, and another piece fell into place. Perhaps what he had experienced through his ministry in wartime, had made him afraid of going outside the box, of himself. She couldn't know, but the energy from the closed trunk was not the same as the dark books lined in the minister's study, waves of coiled energy came from them as if those times with the military had been the most exciting of his life, that little had really touched him after settling into this home with his wife. That the elegant dinners and the secret wild room upstairs had been his excitement, that the

warmth in the kitchen had sustained him, but that he had not been truly happy here. Old exercise equipment seemed to never have been used lay in the driveway next to the trunks.

Marya walked to the garden shed and saw the minimum to maintain a yard, lawn mowers, clippers, shovels, and she realized that there was virtually no landscaping at all to the property. There were two randomly placed or retained oak trees, no trees or shrubs in the front of the property, no sign that there was ever a vegetable garden or a flower grown. The grass lawn in the front of the house was near perfect, smooth, rectangles on either side of the driveway and the cement walkway up to the elegant leaded glass front door. Marya, a gardener herself, couldn't imagine a life or a home without a garden, and thought of the soft floral bedspread, the rosebud bowl inside the clear glass bowls in her hand. The flowers were only symbolic here, although when they had entertained, the heavy expensive vases had been filled with cut flowers. There were many vases. Perhaps he had brought her flowers when they were not entertaining, and not just on special symbolic occasions. She hoped so.

As Marya moved closer to the shed she found more of the green boxes, and some memorabilia, which she was surprised had not been gathered by the son. Newsclippings blew in the wind and old papers, some with military markings. And, oddly enough, there were boxes and boxes of expensive, dressy and some downright sassy two-tone men's shoes, that looked as if they had never been worn. In the garden shed without prices. As if the man had secretly bought the shoes as a woman would, and then hid them in the shed. As if a minister shouldn't be seen wearing such shoes, that he needs to hide them in the shed. She imagined the man looking over his old war memorabilia, putting on a fun pair of shoes and thinking about old times. This minister had had a secret life. She wondered if his wife had had the four hats or if they had been sold before Marya got there. Marya doubted that that many hats, as many as there were shoes, could be sold that fast.

Marya walked back up to the back door of the house, no longer bombarded by energies she didn't understand. She walked through the warm kitchen and the fine dining room to the front parlor where the son was trying to make a deal with someone over an antique parlor table. There was a sweet woman behind a card table with a cash box who she recognized from other estate sales and they exchanged hellos and how are you's briefly. Marya paid for the rosebud box and the glass bowls and took a last look at the scene of folks hovering over the fine dining pieces and furniture, and the son nervously shifting from foot to foot, insisting on the quality of the parlor table and the firm price he would not go below, but his strong desire to sell. His face was big and round and pink in places

and his eyes empty and sad. She could tell he was one of those without a strong reserve of self esteem.

She opened the front door, admiring the glass knob and smiling. Marya loved glass doorknobs. She closed the door behind her and looked to her left where she had last seen the couple. She was glad she had waved to them every time she had seen them, that somehow she had given them a little lift here and there. She would think of the them when she had a bowl of cereal in the mornings, or whisked some fresh eggs to scramble, or came up with a new recipe for a sauce. She would think of them sharing what they could of warmth and purity and wholeness of spirit with each other in the bright kitchen. She would think of the woman as she placed the rosebud box on her own dresser and imagine her own sexuality, sometimes, tight as an unfurled rosebud, sometimes opened with a flush of dusky pink rose.

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