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Millie's Place

Barbara Eknoian

If anyone had a hard luck story, they could find a room at Millie's boarding house. Ever since she heard the Salvation Army Band play at Journal Square when she was about 13, Millie had been intrigued by their "good works." About the same time, she had gone to the movies and had seen Jean Simmons starring in *Guys and Dolls*. Jean looked so lovely in her Salvation Army bonnet. Millie fantasized she would grow up and hand out Bible tracts on street corners. She would serve soup to the down-and-outers.

Instead of doing so, she accepted Andy Taborini's proposal when she was 18. Her father had encouraged her to marry him; he thought there might not be another opportunity. He had pointed to the fact that her cousin Rose had been real fussy, and she was still an old maid. That was *way* before women's lib.

Although Andy had been a decent husband, he hadn't had too much imagination when it came to fun. They never did anything during their married life that could be considered even remotely glamorous. A week at the Jersey Shore every year, that was about it. Maybe some fishing at Lake Hopatcong.

When he died unexpectedly at age fifty, he left Millie to fend for herself. Andy hadn't believed in insurance. Their house wasn't paid off, so Millie decided to take in boarders. Sometimes she had just enough to pay her expenses. Often boarders left owing her rent. She didn't mind too much, if she knew they really had experienced a hardship. She believed, in some small way, that she was helping mankind.

When she overheard Jack Thompson, a long-time boarder, telling someone she wasn't a great cook, she felt hurt. She asked him, "What do you want for \$150.00 a week for room and board, French cooking?"

She noticed Jack's face redden and was surprised that he looked embarrassed to have been overheard. He hunched his shoulders and drew his neck down, looking like a turtle alert for danger, adding quickly, "You know you'll never miss a meal here, and the linens are changed once a week. She's a great little housekeeper." These words seemed to soften the hurtful remark for Millie.

She insisted her turn-of-the-century house be Dutch-boy clean. It stood out from other houses on the block: some hadn't been painted in years. Jack had recently painted the shutters emerald green, her flower-boxes daffodil yellow. People always commented favorably about her home.

Friday evenings were always hectic at Millie's. The boarders looked forward eagerly to their weekends. Rita, a 30-year-old divorcée, always chatting non-stop, babbled on about her date that evening. Since the kitchen had the best light, she placed her magnifying mirror on the kitchen table so that she could apply her makeup. She knew not to tie up the bathroom as the male boarders would usually complain that she was taking too long in there. She asked, "So Millie, what are you doing tonight?"

"Oh, I'll probably just stay home and read. Haven't had much free time lately.

Just look at the books from my book club piling up on my desk.”

“Why don’t you go to bingo or go dancing? You’re still young enough to get another man.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Millie said, continuing to sponge off the white ceramic tile on the counter. “One man is quite enough. If the good Lord gives you one good man in a lifetime, be thankful.”

“Well, he didn’t give me one yet,” Rita said. She closed one eye and smudged heavy black liner on her lid. “I’m going to keep looking until I make a good catch, and he won’t be a guppy either,” she laughed. Then she stood up and pointed down at the black knit dress she was wearing. “Is this too short?”

“If you want my opinion, it sure is,” Millie said as she turned off the overhead light at the kitchen sink.

Rita did a slow twirl in the middle of the kitchen and pointed her toe towards Millie. “George down at the factory told me I’ve got the most beautiful legs he’s ever seen.” She wiggled to adjust her sheer black panty hose.

Millie looked at Rita’s tight-fitting mini dress and shook her head disapprovingly. She said, “I hope you gave him a compliment right back.”

“Compliment George? Why should I?” Rita looked puzzled.

“Because of the Evil Eye. If someone gives you a compliment, it means they probably envy something about you. It brings bad luck.”

“But George is a man. I know a female might envy me. I’m sure George has something else in mind.”

“Hmm, you’re probably right on that account,” Millie said. “Just remember, when someone compliments you, compliment them right back. It reverses the curse.”

“What curse?” Rita looked concerned.

When a subject excited Millie, she talked with her hands, and now they were in full swing. It was her Italian heritage. Pointing her index finger at Rita, she said, “You see, I know from experience because my family used to tell me about this. I thought it was just superstition. Then as I got older, I got wiser.” She sat back in her chair and folded her arms. “I started to notice things. For instance, my cousin Eddie always got compliments on his curly red hair. Today, he’s bald.”

Then she leaned forward toward Rita as though telling her something confidential.

“You know my friend, Ida? She bragged about her dress size, a 5. Now she shops at the Large Size Mart. And I remember when Esther Stevenson beat out Joanne Taylor for best smile in our yearbook. I ran into Esther at the dentist’s office, and guess what?”

“She’s got false teeth,” Rita laughed.

“Exactly.” Millie looked pleased with Rita for the first time that evening. As she walked out to sit on the front porch, she turned around again, saying, “Just remember: always return a compliment.”

If the weather wasn’t too chilly, Millie usually read the newspaper out on the wide wrap-around porch that circled the front of the house, extending to the sides. She and Andy had bought the house for that very reason.

She looked up from her paper, and her glasses almost slid off her small nose. Jonathan, a favorite boarder, was whistling as he came up the walk.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry I'm late. Are there leftovers I could warm up?" He sat on the steps next to her rocker. Jonathan was always even-tempered and pleasant, whether he worked overtime or not.

"Of course. There's ham, sweet potatoes, and fresh coffee. Just put your plates in the dishwasher when you're done."

"Will do, no problem," he said, hurrying into the house.

The lamplights cast shadows on her walkway, and she realized it was too dark to continue reading her paper. She got up to go inside but saw Jack pushing a supermarket basket down the block toward her house. She said under her breath, "Here comes trouble."

"Good evening, Ma'am," Jack said swinging his cart to the side of the house. He addressed her as "Ma'am" to tease her. They were about the same age. It seemed to Millie that he liked to make her feel she was his senior.

"Stop right there, Jack." Millie attempted to sound stern. "I thought I told you I didn't want those darn bottles, and who knows what else, in my backyard!"

"Geez, Millie, I can get a good price for this stuff. I can pay you what I owe sooner." He grinned at her. "Recycling is the craze. We could join the Sierra Club together."

"Sierra Club?" She raised one eyebrow. "Leave me out of your schemes, Jack. No more junk. It might bring bugs." Standing there with her hands on her hips, she maintained a serious look. "Besides, you could get a fine." He hurried toward the backyard to stash his stuff.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she thought, *I'm the landlady. I hate to be a nag, but he doesn't listen.* She felt too tired to have any further discussion with him. It was like talking to a gray-haired teenager. She went inside to have some coffee.

Jonathan scanned his newspaper while talking about his latest project down at Perris Community College. He was the supervisor of the grounds. "Hey, there's a sale at the Garden Center." He leaned towards Millie to share the paper with her. "We could get some azaleas and bedding plants."

This comment reminded Millie that just that morning she had thrown away one of her African violets. It made her feel sad to remember it blossoming beautifully last month, but then to see all the leaves wilted today. She wondered if she had over-watered the violet. Whenever she lost a plant, she felt a pang of regret. Somehow, it made her think of the time she lost her baby. He had been born prematurely with beautiful dark hair and tiny, tiny fingers and toes. He only lived for one day. She was in deep thought: *Maybe, he would have been as outgoing as Jonathan. They had been born the same year.*

Jonathan interrupted her reverie. "How about some coral and white bushes?"

"Why, that's so nice of you. I'll pay you for your time. I don't want to take advantage of my boarders."

"No problem. You know I like flowers too." He carried his plate to the dishwasher and went upstairs to take a shower.

She felt so fortunate to have Jonathan for a boarder. He was hard-working and level-headed. She knew he'd make some girl a great husband.

Then Jack moseyed into the kitchen, and Millie's posture stiffened. She said, "Look here, I just cleaned the kitchen. I'm going upstairs to read. You can make yourself a sandwich, and don't forget to rinse off your plate and put it in the washer."

As she headed for the staircase, Jack yelled, "Discrimination! Right here at Millie's."

"What are you talking about?"

"Looks like Jonathan ate a hot meal. I get a sandwich, and I can still smell those sweet potatoes."

She didn't know why she often over-reacted to his teasing remarks. It seemed to Millie that he was always looking for a sparring partner. She wanted to ignore him but added, "At least Jonathan cleans up his mess." She hurried up the stairs so he wouldn't have the last word.

The next morning was Saturday, and she finished her chores right away. She dressed in slacks and wore her navy woolen jacket. It was a little nippy for spring. She still had a youthful figure, but she hid it by wearing loose-fitting clothing. Her dark brown hair was sprinkled with gray, but she still looked younger than sixty. Rita constantly coaxed her to color it. Millie always resisted. As she got ready to tie a scarf over her head she thought, *Maybe, I will try one of those rinses. I've always liked auburn.*

She was a very private person who never told anyone where she was going. She ran to the corner and caught the bus to go to the square to see a matinée. The movies had held a special place in her heart since she was a little girl. She did not want to go to one of the newer complexes where twelve movies were featured at one time. She preferred to sit in the huge luxurious movie palace downtown; she admired its Renaissance architecture. When the lavish wine-red draperies glided open, and the feature began, she was a child again. The Stanley Theater was her favorite. She would look up at the ceiling, which seemed like a midnight black sky studded with diamond-like stars. She thought people didn't know what they were missing by sitting in the modern alley-like theaters.

On the bus ride to the theater, she reminisced about going to Saturday matinées with her mother. She guessed she must have been about four or five years old when they watched the extravagant musicals. She was in awe of the big screen. Everyone happily danced down sidewalks. People sang to each other instead of talking. *What a wonderful place to be*, she used to think. In her young



*Photo by
Stephanie Ast*

mind, she believed she could walk down the aisle, climb the steps to the stage, and step into that happy place. Sometimes, she would say to herself, "One, two, three. Go." But she never did. She'd think, *maybe next time I'll do it.*

As she entered the darkened theater, she decided to sit near a young family. She had had two bad experiences when she was a young girl, when some pervert had sat next to her. She had gotten up and run home.

Another time, she had the nerve to tell the usher at the candy counter that some man kept following her and her friend, Mary. Whenever they changed seats, he did too. No Siree, she did not want to sit alone in the row.

Millie sometimes spoke out loud, murmuring little comments: "My, my, would you look at that. Why, I'll be." She'd forget she was there alone, and she missed having Andy with her. She always brought plenty of tissues in case of a real tear-jerker.

On this particular Saturday, she walked out as the credits rolled down the screen, and her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. The movie had a vague ending, and she wondered whether the couple would wind up together. When she was a kid, if she had not understood the film, she coaxed her mom to explain the story. Her mother would edit the story so that Millie could have a happy ending.

Right after serving an early supper on Sunday, Millie got ready to go out. She put on a tailored navy dress with matching heels and purse and chose pearl earrings to wear.

Jack noticed she was all dressed up, and he teased, "Going to meet somebody downtown, Mildred?"

She just ignored him, wondering if he had started drinking again. He was a recovering alcoholic. He usually attended AA meetings on Sunday. She hoped he hadn't slipped, though there was no evidence in the house that he might have. Jack had settled in the city after retiring from the Navy. He had never married, but according to his tales, he'd had many, many girlfriends. He said he'd gotten drunk once in Honolulu and almost married an islander, but his buddies rescued him and carried him back to the ship. Millie thought that things had gone the other way around. They had rescued the girl, not Jack. That was the closest he had ever come to commitment.

Because he was always annoying to her, Millie couldn't admit to herself that she found him attractive. He was tall, and he always bragged that he could still fit into his uniform. She quickly brushed such thoughts aside, hoping she wouldn't be late for the service.

Although she was Catholic, she went every Sunday evening to the Pentecostal Church. Mostly, she enjoyed the music, hand-clapping, and foot-stomping when the congregation was moved by the Spirit. For some reason, the music stirred her spiritually. She felt closer to God at that little Pentecostal Church. It was none of anyone's business that she went there every week. She just kept it to

herself.

Rita burst into the dining room. She stuck out her hand and flashed a pear-shaped diamond. "George has finally proposed." She circled the dining room table showing off her ring.

Jack jumped up and gave her a hug, and so did Jonathan. Millie put the coffee pot down and kissed her on the cheek.

She could see that Rita was ecstatic.

"This time it's for keeps," Rita said, crossing her heart.

Since Rita's family had retired to Florida, Millie thought she should have a little party to celebrate the engagement. She decided to browse through some *Family Circle* magazines to get ideas for a party buffet.

As she clipped out a recipe, Jack came out and sat on the step next to the rocker, Jonathan's usual seat. She thought to herself, *Now, I wonder what he wants. Maybe he needs to borrow a few dollars.* She argued in her own mind whether or not she would lend him some money.

He turned to look at her directly and said, "How would you like to go to the movies?"

She was dumbfounded. *Movies with Jack? Why, it was unheard of.* She felt so embarrassed and could not understand why he had asked her. He had exhibited strange behavior before, but this unexpected offer topped it all.

She did not want to be rude because he looked totally sincere. Then she thought, *He's probably setting me up for a joke. Is it April Fools?* She actually stuttered, saying, "I...I...I'm too busy to go to the movies, Jack." She waited for some teasing comment. There was none.

"I know you go to the movies every Saturday," Jack said. "Why not go with me?"

"How do you know that?"

"I know you go to the Holy Spirit Pentecostal Church on Sunday nights, too." He looked sheepish. "I was worried about you heading downtown all by yourself, so I followed you one night. I slipped into a back pew of the church. You didn't notice. To tell you the truth, I enjoyed the service. And when I looked your way, you were standing there clapping and smiling. You looked ten years younger. I don't know why. Since then, I've been meaning to ask you to the movies." He looked shy after saying all this. Millie tried to hide her surprise. She felt like a blushing high school senior finally asked to the prom, and she was flustered.

She heard an inner voice say, "One, two, three. Go."

Then, Millie said. "I don't like those modern theaters, Jack. If you'll take me to the Stanley downtown, I'll go."

