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Boston Common

by Anna Harrington

When her husband Spaulding died in a freak tie-rack accident, Miriam was not surprised. After all, she had been dodging Fate for years.

In fact, in quiet moments, when she hid from the world in her mauve-colored sitting room overlooking Louisburg Square and let herself reflect, she could admit that she had spent the past thirty years running to stay just one step ahead of Fate and now, now that she was tired of running, spent most of her time waiting for the cosmic blow that would pound her back down into the life she should have lived. Borrowed time—that was how she thought of it. She never deserved to have the wealthy husband with the mansion in Beacon Hill, a paved road into Boston society, cars, yachts, servants...My God! There was even a summer house in Maine. By rights, she shouldn't have had any of it. By rights, she should have been living in some drafty clapboard on the far south side, working the counter at the corner Walgreen's, married to a janitor or dock worker, and consistently dropping her R's. There was no shame in that in her old neighborhood, none of the mental effort she forced upon herself each time she spoke to remember that elusive consonant...paRRRRk the caRRRR in HaRRRRvaRRRRd YaRRRRd. Even something as small as that threatened every day to give her *away*, to mark her as an intruder into the world of Boston society, to bring the closed fist of Fate straight down upon her head. Each day, she held her breath and waited for Fate to block her path, point a jagged finger at her, and declare in a voice reminiscent of the biblical echo of God, "You—you are a Marjckowolski!"

When she walked into her husband's dressing room and saw his body lying doubled over the motorized tie-rack, she didn't scream. She had felt his death coming the same way that some old men predict rain by pains in arthritic joints. She had predicted the fist of Fate, only she was horribly

sorry that the way the message had arrived was through Spaulding's death. Surely, Fate could have spared an innocent. Except, she conceded as she lifted his head to loosen the tie which had become entangled around the little motor's cogs on one end and around his neck on the other, that Spaulding had been her accomplice. He had known when he married her that she wasn't part of his world of old money, country clubs, and Ivy League schools which his family had attended for generations, but he had chosen to ignore it and the differences that marked her as an outsider. Or rather, chosen to join her in hiding them.

So she straightened out his body, sat on the floor beside him with his head in her lap, and waited for Fate to finish the job. When the maid found her, she wrongly assumed that Mrs. Harris was waiting for the coroner to arrive. It was Georges, the oldest of their three children, who stepped to the head of the family upon his father's death and made the funeral arrangements. Miriam had let the kids believe that she was too distraught to make the arrangements herself, while the truth was that she was afraid of making mistakes. She had never thrown a society funeral before. The last funeral she had arranged was her brother's, ten years before, and that had been easy. It was a traditional Methodist event, complete with a preacher whom her brother had never met, the first two verses of "Amazing Grace," and a pot-luck dinner in the church basement. She was gone from Boston for less than a week. No one from the family came with her. No one knew she even had a brother.

But with Spaulding's funeral, there was so much that could have gone wrong. What was the right kind of flower? He had always liked white orchids, but would those be right for a funeral? An Episcopalian church, of course, but what music? Even choosing a coffin was an ordeal. How much should a family of Spaulding Harris' status spend?



Too much would be ostentatious, too little would be beneath them. Thank goodness Georges was there. Whenever the funeral director needed a decision, her son would lovingly pat her arm at the sudden attack of distress that seized her and would answer for her. And so the funeral was planned by a surrogate.

It was a lovely funeral. At least, that's what all the attendees told her, and that's what was written in the *Boston Globe* and the *Herald-American*. To Miriam, it was all a blur. She had cried—of course, she had cried; he was her husband after all—and let her youngest son Stephen lead her through all the formalities in a kind of tear-shielded cocoon that kept everyone away. Her daughter Lillian attended the guests. If Miriam had made any mistakes, they were blamed on her grief and not given a second thought.

No one questioned her behavior until the obituary ran in the local paper. *The Beacon Hill News*, that rag, that weekly waste of paper whose only productive use was lining bird cages throughout Back Bay. No, she shouldn't be so hard on the young man who wrote the piece. After all, he gave a glowing summary of Spaulding's life, his business savvy, his dedication to friends and family. Could she blame the reporter if one of the examples he used to define Spaulding's character was that he had married beneath himself? That he had defied the conventions of Boston society and married a metal-worker's daughter? With each word she read, she felt Fate creep closer until it stood next to her, gleefully reading over her shoulder. It snatched her heart from her chest and, with a shriek of happiness, cast it out the window onto the Commons.

Life as Miriam had grown to know it was over. Immediately, she was voted off the board of the Boston Ladies' League, the Beacon Hill Garden Club, and the Ladies' Auxiliary of Massachusetts General Hospital. The country club regretfully cancelled her membership—the membership was in Spaulding's name, not hers, they tactfully explained, but if she wanted to re-apply through normal procedures, then they felt compelled to tell

her that the club was not accepting new members at this time. Old invitations to charity and political events were rescinded; new invitations never arrived. Her friends did not return her calls.

Even her own children, after each giving her one angry phone call, left her alone in order to adjust to the life-long lie she had thrust upon them.

She did not blame any of them and simply surrendered herself to a new life of isolation. She rarely left the Beacon Hill townhouse, spending her days in her sitting room at the window, staring down at the little patch of park that all the houses on the Square shared. It would only be a matter of time, she supposed, before all the neighbors petitioned to have her share of the park's ownership revoked. But until then, she determined to take her morning tea at the window and watch as the gardener attended to the plants.

She enjoyed watching him perform his greenery rituals. She knew on what days he watered the lilies, when he pruned the roses, when he washed down the stone statues. At her window, she watched his white-overalled figure arrive at nine and dirty himself among the old trees until the overalls were soiled brown and he wiped at his sweaty brow with his forearm. Too far away to see the dirty streak he left behind, she knew it was there on his face just as surely as she knew he drank from the garden hose with his left hand. When the August heat burned across the city, then he lifted the hose over his head and let the cool water soak him. Miriam was fascinated with him. He was never impressed with the grand mansions lining the square—or at least, he never let it show as he worked. He was never early and never late, and carried on with his job as if he were glad to be alone with the lilac bushes and wild Queen Anne's Lace. He was the kind of man she should have been with in that other life, the one in which she didn't marry Spaulding.

"Your tea, ma'am." The maid handed the cup and saucer to her.

For the first time since the funeral, she waved it away.

Her sitting room seemed strange to her, the



mauve walls suffocating, the contrasting yellows garish and fake. It was a sterile room—the objects inside were chosen by a decorator to match the rug, none of them containing any memories. It was the same with the hall and its antique table and chairs, it was the same with each of the bedrooms she passed...the study, the master bed and bath, the guest bath, the second floor front parlor. She saw each room as if looking through the pages of a women's magazine. The stairs emptied into a green marble foyer accentuated by the gold-trimmed front doors. Also antiques. Also chosen by some faceless, nameless decorator that Spaulding had hired to renovate the townhouse. To make it a home of quality. Well, it was quality, she admitted, if money equaled quality, but it was never a home. Not the kind she remembered from her childhood.

When she opened wide the double front doors, she saw him. He rubbed his dirty hands across the front of his overalls and reached toward the rose bush. She crossed the street, grabbed the iron fencing with both hands, and pressed her face between the bars.

He saw her watching, staring relentlessly at him. A puzzled tilt of his head. She knew no one from the townhouses had ever approached him before. He wiped his hands clean against his

thighs.

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

Floral scents surrounded him like a cloud. The smell of tilled dirt, the sharp freshness of cut grass, lilacs and daisies...she breathed him in.

“Ma’am?”

“What is your name?” she asked delicately, as if she were gently peeling dead petals from a rose.

“Bud, ma’am.”

“Bud? Bud like a—”

“Beer. Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh.”

She liked his hands. They were rough, covered with dozens of tiny cuts where weed blades had sliced them, and dirt had outlined the nails.

“See you tomorrow.”

He nodded, puzzled. “Yes, ma’am.”

Miriam was true to her word. The next day, she stood at the iron fence and wished him good morning, watched as he tended the roses, weeded the lawn, and cleaned up after the trees. They talked, barely, but still she came every morning. After a few weeks, she stepped inside the park and sat on a stone bench. He didn't seem to mind. After a few months, he walked her back across the street at the end of the day and said goodbye to her at



the townhouse door. When they married one year later, the children refused to attend. She sold all the assets she had inherited from Spaulding—the townhouse, the Maine cottage, the Rolls-Royce, the stocks, all of it—and placed the money in trust for the grandchildren.

The new house was located in Swampscott. It was a two-bedroom clapboard with yellow paint that had grown dingy and faded over the years, and the front garden gate was broken. So was the top porch step. With time, she learned to ignore the dirty paint, to lift the gate before dropping the latch, to step over the top step. She didn't mind those so much. The little differences disturbed her: polyester pillows and cotton sheets, water straight from the tap, and no more freshly cut flowers. No more buying whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. There were no more new dresses, no more trips to expensive salons, and no more box seats at the symphony, ballet, or theatre. Now, nights out were spent drinking beer at O'Malley's Bar, she got her hair done at the corner Clip-N-Curl, and she bought her clothes at second-hand stores. But no matter, she told herself as she washed and folded Bud's underwear, this was the life she was born to lead. Or maybe, she let herself admit during the long New England winter when Bud wasn't working and money was more scarce than ever, it was a

poorer life than the one she was born for. She was born into the working class, not into poverty. But her second marriage was also penance for her first. She hoped to counter the years of overindulgence with years of stark poverty and, somehow, find a balance.

But even after several years had passed in Swampscott, the balance never came. She struggled to fit into the new world she had married into, terrified each time they stepped into O'Malley's that someone would figure out that she didn't belong, that someone would recognize her from her old pictures in the society pages of *The Globe*. Every night out was agony as she struggled to hold her cigarette properly, as she constantly reminded herself not to make a face when she drank her beer, as she concentrated on dropping her R's. Where would she go if someone learned the truth about her life? What could possibly be left for her? She had fallen so far already. And as she sat on the red vinyl barstool and watched her cigarette shrivel in the ashtray, she felt a cold breath chill the back of her neck. Fate had found her again.

When her second husband Bud died in a freak lawn jockey accident, Miriam was not surprised. After all, she had been dodging Fate for years.

