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surprise probate

Marthey's Choice

By Lu Spurlock

When Marthey Wentworth breathed her last, I told Stephen he'd done all he could; he should go on to work. Then I called Marthey's high-falutin' sister, Viola Fetherspoon in New York City, and her brother, J. Fredrick.

Viola Fetherspoon and J. Fredrick didn't know Marthey had cancer, but I guess they can't be blamed for that. She wasn't much on words, and she didn't have any use for Viola and J. Fredrick after they wouldn't help her take care of their mamma.

Viola said her mamma wouldn't fit in New York City and I think J. Fredrick was ashamed of her, him bein' bank president up in Willowsap, Oklahoma.

Viola and J. Fredrick said they were too busy to come to Fort Worth for their mamma's funeral, but Marthey said that wasn't the reason they didn't come. She said they knew their mamma willed her all she had. That old lady lived with Marthey for over twenty years.

Viola and J. Fredrick showed up for Marthey's funeral. They knew Marthey set great store by insurance, and as her only survivin' kin, I think they figgered Marthey left them a bundle.

They sent right respectable bouquets to the funeral home. 'Course Stephen's was the biggest, but mine was the prettiest. Me and Marthey's been friends ever since we started to school together in Shilo Springs.

Marthey studied nights and got her teachin' certificate pretty quick after we moved to Fort Worth. I never liked school much, so when Josh Peterson proposed I got married and started raisin' kids.

Marthey was pretty enough to find herself a husband, but she never had nothin' to do with men 'til after her mamma died. Then Marthey went wild. I talked to her about it once, but she just smiled and said she was sewin' her wild oats 40 years late.

I guess it was wild oats that made Marthey giggle because she never did before. It was a high tinkly sound, like she didn't want to laugh but was so happy

it popped out.

Marthey was 55 when she started going to see those male strippers. She tried to get me to go with her, but I told her Josh wouldn't like it. Truth of the matter is, I went once by myself. Those nekkid young men didn't appeal to me.

It wasn't that way with Marthey. She liked them all. She had pictures of them hanging in her living room, some of them with nothin' on, too.

The teachers at that Baptist college where Marthey worked thought it was sinful, her with cancer spending money on kisses from male strippers. They said it was their bounden duty to go with her one night to point out how sinful it was. Two of them went back three or four times trying to convince her.

Marthey just smiled and kept going to "He Bare" every Friday night. Stephen was her favorite; she said she loved him. I guess he liked Marthey pretty well too; leastways he liked those silk shirts she bought him.

I'll say this for Stephen; he spent Marthey's last days with her at the hospital. He told those nurses he was Marthey's son so they wouldn't run him out of her room.

Marthey smiled and held on to Stephen's hand. She smiled more those days than I'd ever seen her smile before. That last night layin' there in her pink ruffled nightgown she was better lookin' than when she was young.

I was at the funeral home when J. Fredrick and Viola saw her body, and I could tell they were surprised she looked so pretty. Another surprise was me bein' executor of the estate. They expected it to be Josh's brother Sam since he was a lawyer, but Marthey wanted me to do it. She did have Sam write the will so it would be good and legal.

Viola and J. Fredrick said they had to leave town right after the funeral, and they wanted me to read the will that day; but that wasn't what Marthey wanted. I made them cool their heels in Fort Worth for three days.

On Tuesday, September 14th at ten o'clock in the morning, I went down to Josh's brother's conference room to read the will good and proper. Stephen got there right after I did and waited, polite like always.

The surprise on J. Fredrick's and Viola's faces when they opened the door and saw Stephen was somethin' to see. Viola turned white and her lips pinched together in a thin red line. "What's he doing here," she demanded, in that New York accent she fakes.

I said, "Mrs. Fetherspoon, shake hands with Stephen Sontag. You too, Mr. Wentworth. You might as well get acquainted."

Stephen held out his hand, but Viola didn't touch it. Well, I never," she said and marched over to a high-backed chair where she sat stiffer'n a poker.

J. Fredrick nodded. With gray eyes that looked like bullets, he stared at Stephen, muttered "Sontag," and walked over to the head of the table where I sat. He tried to pick up the will. "I'm sure you want me to read this for you."

"Oh, no you don't." I picked up a paperweight and tapped his fingers a mite harder than necessary. He didn't say nothin' more, just sat down on the only leather chair in the room.

"Let's get on with it," Viola hissed, and the wart on her nose seemed to grow.

Stephen sat quiet, his biceps bulging against the sleeves of his white silk shirt.

Viola sucked in her breath when I unfolded the will. "State of Texas, County of Tarrant," I read.

"We know what state and county it is. Just read what she left us," J. Fredrick said.

"Of course, Mr. Wentworth."

Viola squirmed, then sat straight and imposin', staring at me.

I cleared my throat a couple of times. J. Fredrick turned steely eyes on me and I decided it'd be best not to delay the will readin' any longer. I read: "To my brother, J. Fredrick Wentworth, who always likes to make a good impression, I leave ten crisp one dollar bills."

"Surely, that's not all," he gasped.

"It is for you."

Breathing hard, J. Fredrick wilted.

"Quiet, please," I said in my business voice.

Ignoring Stephen, Viola chortled, "Big brother, you didn't win this time. She left it all to me."

I cleared my throat again and read: "To my sister, Viola Featherspoon, I bequeath my most valued possessions, the pictures hanging in my living room."

A smile spread across Viola's face. "I didn't know my little sister collected art. Good paintings are valuable. What else did she leave me?"

"That's all," I said. "But those pictures aren't paintings. They're beefcake."

Her mouth dropped open. "Beefcake? I don't understand."

"Posters," I said, "pictures of nekkid men."

Viola stood up looking like she was going to wring my neck. "The insurance, tell me about the insurance."

"There are two policies," I said, "one made out to

me to cover her bills and burial."

"And the other?"

"It's for a hundred thousand dollars. Stephen's the beneficiary."

"No!" she screamed.

J. Fredrick jumped up, and the way he clenched his fists those manicured fingernails of his must'a bit his palms. "She was crazy. We'll go to court."

Stephen rose. "I'm leaving. You know where to reach me."

I nodded.

When Viola and J. Fredrick went to court that winter, I had a ring-side seat.

Stephen's lawyer picked a jury of little old ladies. Then he put Stephen on the witness stand dressed in a good lookin' three-piece suit that fit him just right. Sitting there with his wavy blond hair brushed back nice and neat, he looked better'n one of those Greek gods.

I could tell those ladies liked jury duty, 'specially when Stephen's lawyer told them they had to study the posters he subpoenaed. They got all red faced and giggley, but it didn't take them long to decide Marthey was of sound mind when she made her choice.

And when that judge read the verdict, I'd swear on a stack of Bibles I heard Marthey giggle. ■

LU SPURLOCK publishes short fiction, poetry, and articles. A resident of Bedford, Texas, she teaches workshop classes in Dallas and Fort Worth and Continuing Education classes at Texas Christian University.

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