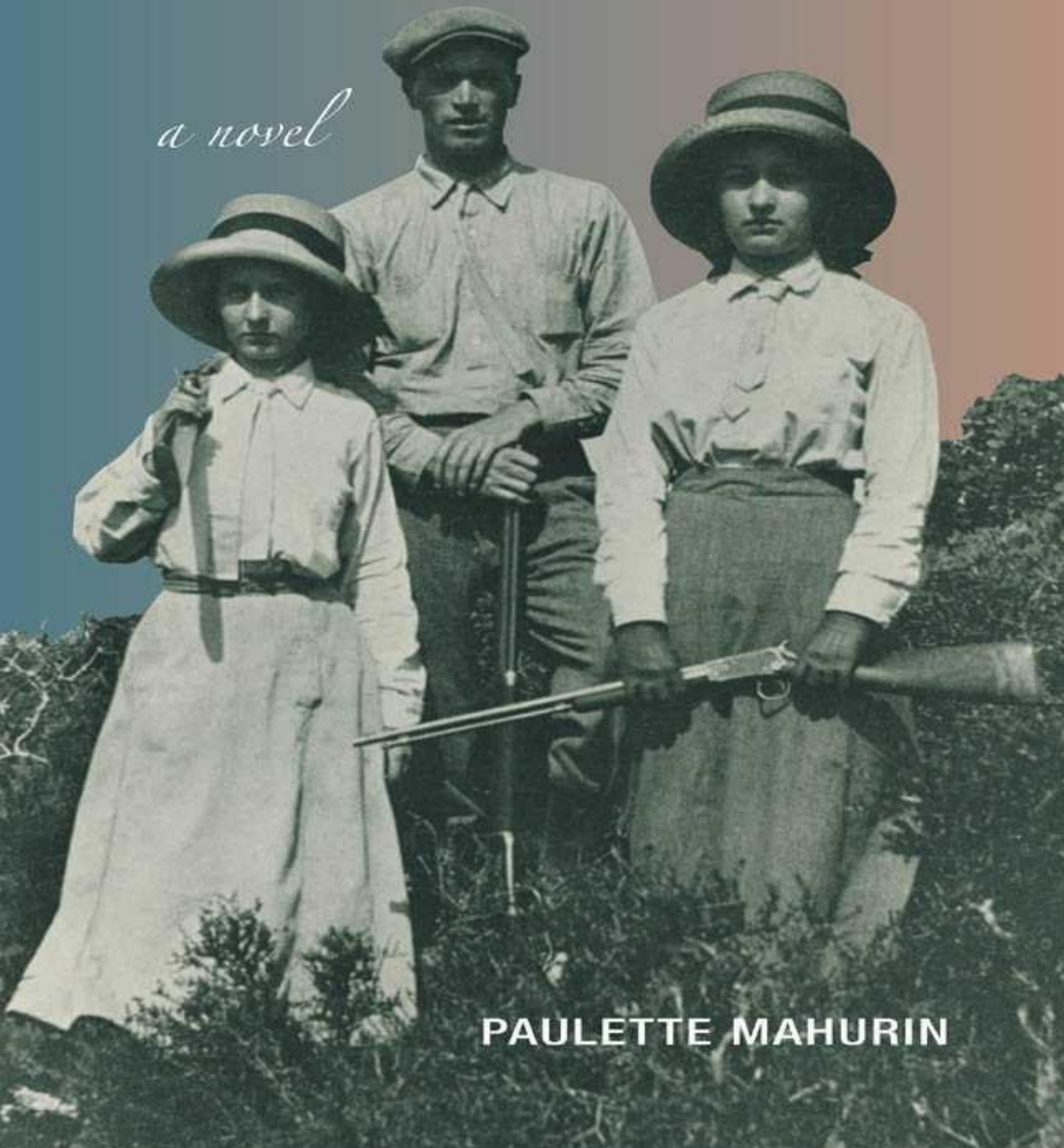


The Persecution of Mildred Dunlap

a novel



PAULETTE MAHURIN

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To Irving and Rose

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“For one moment our lives met, our souls touched.”

OSCAR WILDE

“One can survive everything nowadays, except death, and live down everything except a good reputation.” OSCAR WILDE

Prologue

1895

Telegraphs clacked around the world with the breaking news of the conviction of Oscar Wilde. Mr. Wilde, noted celebrity and one of the most successful playwrights, novelists, poets, and short story writers, suffered a stunning defeat when he was sentenced to two years of hard labor in prison after being convicted for “gross indecency.” Wilde’s case, one of the first tried under Britain’s recently passed Criminal Law Amendment Act, criminalized sexual activity between members of the same sex, thus changing people’s attitudes about homosexuality from a mood of pity and tolerance to hatred and abuse.

The unofficial buzz in the tabloids was that Wilde was caught in the act with another male, Lord Douglas, the son of the Marquis of Queensberry, and Victorian London would have none of it. The news of trial and conviction spread fast and furiously to towns large and small around the world, exactly the kind of news story Red River Pass, a small town in Nevada, relished.

“Anyone who lives within their means suffers from a lack of imagination.” OSCAR
WILDE

1

In the middle of the night, in the sleepy town of Red River Pass, a lonely telegraph machine clicked away, with no one yet present to receive its message, delivering in Morse code the news of a writer in England who had just made legal history for being the first famous person convicted of *committing acts of gross indecency*. The news, significant as it was, would repeat hourly around the clock, with deciphered words setting in motion titillating gossip about homosexuality.

Red River Pass, a small Nevada town, had a similar incident of smaller magnitude several years back when a couple of local boys told lies about seeing two men hugging. This caused an upheaval in the lives of those men and their families. Some still believe the lies told were true, especially after one of the men committed suicide over the incident. Back then, two men hugging was bad enough; but now a man had been put on trial and thrown in prison for sexual activity with another man. The fact that this was now recognized in England as an illegal criminal act was sure to cause a frenzy.

*

The early morning dry cool air had just enough breeze to send a tumbleweed or two through the empty streets, as wooden sidewalks gained new cracks, and bodies stirred to wake.

Mildred Dunlap’s day started, like every other, at five-thirty sunrise. While dressing she looked out her bedroom window to a place several feet from the house to notice a six-foot sagebrush moving. At first she did not see anything in the sand nearby. Then at closer view she caught sight of a sage grouse browsing leaves. The plant had not yet blossomed into the tiny yellowish white flowers that would come with summer, still a few months away. She loved this time of year when spring started paving the way to summer, and her body surrendered to the warmth. A time when life begins to slow and relax in the heat, like a quiet that comes with the nighttime in a bustling city.

The good mood she was in abruptly ended when she went to her kitchen and found the beginning of a rat’s nest at the bottom of a pantry. Twigs, leaves, bristles of pinecone, tiny particles of what looked like wood from a mesquite shrub, and a corner of a piece of fabric from a towel were alongside several droppings.

“Darn it!” she yelled, waking her cousin Edra from her sleep.

When Edra found her, she was in the kitchen on her knees. “What’s...” She looked at the mess. “Oh no, I thought Ben took care of that.”

“Not what I like waking up to,” Mildred replied.

“I know. I know.”

“Now I’ll end up spending the day here cleaning this mess and trying to find how they’re getting in.” She peered in further to survey the extent of the damage and mumbled something unintelligible then backed out in disgust. “Do I have to do everything myself?”

Edra moved closer to put a hand on Mildred's shoulder to assuage the frustration. "I can clean this up. Ben can patch the openings...you need to get the horse medicine in town."

"Ben's not coming out to work till this afternoon. If the right thing had been delivered in the first place..."

"Mil. It's just a rash on Lil," Edra commented about Mildred's horse. She knew Mildred was annoyed at having to return to town to rectify the mistake, and now this on top of it. "You hate those rats. You go to town and I'll handle this. The rest can wait till Ben gets here." Edra smiled.

Mildred softened. She didn't want to have Edra do what she herself found repulsive. "You sure?" She laughed, releasing some irritation. "I was in such a good mood when I woke up."

"By the time you get home you'll feel better."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

*

Mildred, still in a bad mood when she saw the crowd outside the telegraph office, became even more annoyed that people were milling around, not getting on with their business. When she got within earshot she heard the excited voices.

"That's disgusting! Can you imagine...they wrote love letters to each other. That turns my stomach...two men together." Sarah Funkle was not discrete in pointing her comment in the direction beyond her circle of friends, which happened to be in earshot of Mildred who was approaching.

"Two men together?" Josie Purdue raised her voice above the crowd, drawing a hush and attention to her. "More like five! All his past lovers came forth. Shows what an ungodly lot they are. He deserves what he got. Throw away the key, that's what I say. Those kinds don't deserve to walk the face of the earth."

"Why didn't they throw them all in prison?"

"The news says 'they repented' for their crimes."

"Repent? Their words don't undo their sinful actions!" Josie was irate. "Lock 'em all away!"

The women broke their conversation when they noticed Mildred near them.

Josie gave Mildred a disapproving once-over as if to say, *With all your money, can't you do better for yourself?*

"Why, hey Mildred," greeted Sarah.

Mildred nodded and tried to continue past them.

"Did you hear the latest?" Josie directed her question at Mildred, in an uncharacteristically friendly manner.

"Ladies," Mildred did not take the bait but turned back for a moment to face them, "If you'll pardon me, I have a sick horse to tend to." She exaggerated her horse's condition as an excuse to get away. She had already heard enough.

"I tell you, that's the most disgusting thing I ever heard." Josie turned back to Sarah. "Just like with Harold Simmons and Bert Langley. And to think it happened right here in our God-fearing town. The nerve... I shudder to think what would have become of things if the Parker boys hadn't found them. That whole lot deserved what they got!"

The edge in Josie's voice with the mention of the Parker boys sent a chill down Mildred's spine. A hot flush surged through her as she recalled the incident that happened several years back. The Parker boys were out playing by the lake when they ran across Harold Simmons hugging Bert Langley. When the Parker boys ran home and told their parents, they exaggerated what they saw. "They were kissing, starting to undress..." said the younger Parker boy to his father. Within twenty-four hours two families were thrown into irreversible turmoil. "Two men don't do things like that," spread like wildfire. Five days after the incident, Harold Simmons took a gun to his head and blew his brains out. A week later, both families moved from Red River Pass.

Although she could not make full sense out of what all the commotion was about, the voice screeching about Wilde and the Parker boys, echoed in Mildred's head as she moved through the crowd into the office where she saw Satchel Purdue busy chattering with several people from town. None of them appeared to be doing any business with him, which further irritated her. She found a quiet spot to write the telegram she had come in to send.

"Yes, it's a busy day here. This'll keep Josie going for months," Satchel laughed, referring to his wife. "She's been at it all morning and..." The sound of ticking from the telegraph machine distracted him. "Excuse me. I better see what this is and get anything new over to Gus's public noticeboard."

Mildred knew Satchel was right about Josie. She thought of them, Josie and Satchel, going to work together. An odd couple they were: he with his tall stiff appearance befitting a telegraph operator whose glasses fogged up with the mention of his wife's name—a thin body and neck that mildly bulged over a tight shirt collar supporting a face that housed wrinkles belying his age, just into his forties; and she loose in her five-foot-four figure with excessively endowed breasts and hips that drew even more attention to her shrill voice.

In contrast to Mildred, Josie thrived on being the center of attention. Outside of them both being women, there was absolutely no similarity in appearance between the two. Whereas Mildred was a large woman with a face masculine in appearance, Josie was pretty in a feminine way with curved lips and eyebrows that accentuated her blue-green eyes and overly dilated pupils seeming always to be alert like an animal stalking prey. Were Josie to have a different personality or attitude she could be beautiful, like Edra, but her demeanor was so distasteful with constant faultfinding in others that it cast a dark ugliness over her. The mere comparison of Edra to Josie, for Mildred, was like comparing good with evil, beauty with ugliness, complete opposites that had nothing desirable in common. Mildred was distracted from her thoughts by the chattering machine that was taking forever to deliver its message. The longer the ticking occurred with everyone's attention riveted on Satchel, and the more time that passed, the more aggravated she became.

"Anything?" Several in the room kept asking while Mildred contained her fury and waited for him to finish.

Satchel took notes on the dots and dashes then turned to the group with a disappointed look. "Nothing about that Wilde fellow." He looked at Mildred waiting at the counter. "What can I do for you?"

She tried not to let her emotions show when she handed him her telegram. "Can you send this today?"

The machine started to click again. "Yeah, sure..." He turned around to see what was arriving and without looking back at her said, "Just leave it on the counter."

She wanted to wait, to insist he send it, and felt put upon with how unprofessionally he conducted his business. But, as usual, she said nothing and left. She wound her way back out through the crowd that had gathered a few more stragglers. The last thing she heard was, "Hanging isn't good enough for the likes of them."

That comment sent her gut into a knotted tension as she made her way down the wooden walkway of the main street. She noticed how dull and devoid of life everything appeared. Dirt in the road was loose from the dry winter sending billows of dust following footsteps, tumbleweeds following horse-drawn buildings, in need of new paint, looked dreary. Even the women dressed in various shades of color looked drab. She thought of Edra, her cousin, out at the ranch alone and her heart grew heavy. *What if...* It was futile to try to stop the replay of the telegraph office conversations.

She passed the sheriff's office where she noticed through the open door overweight Sheriff Ma Roper sitting at his desk with his feet up, stuffing a piece of pie into his mouth and talking to Deputy Jake Cummings. The minute Roper caught sight of Mildred he jumped up and lumbered out of his

office.

~~“Mildred!” He wiped some crumbs from the side of his mouth onto his already dirty pant leg.~~

Mildred felt the tension in the back of her neck rise to the top of her skull. She turned around when she heard her name called and harsh footsteps banging on the planks approached her. “Yeah, Matt.” She moved a hand to the nape of her neck to rub a tender spot.

“Hey, Mildred. About that loan you authorized at the bank last fall...”

Mildred looked on, preoccupied by the throbbing behind her eyes.

“I reckon we’ll be able to start making payments next month.”

Mildred winced.

“You okay, Mildred?”

“Why yes,” she lied. “Lot of commotion going on at the telegraph office this morning.” She wasn’t good at small talk but this was the only thing that came to her, which she regretted the minute she said it.

“Good thing they put that guy in prison. Tell you this, he’s lucky he wasn’t shot on the spot. Me, I know what I’d a done. Hang the...”

Mildred, preoccupied, heard jumbled words coming at her that made no sense.

“Two men together...” Matt’s face flushed. “Not the thing for me to be talking about with a lady, Mildred. I better mind my manners.”

Anxiety gripped her chest, making it difficult to get air in. “I better be getting on now. I have a sick horse I need to tend to.”

“Yeah, well. Just wanted to thank you again for all your help. We’ll be getting to those payments.”

“Just pay when you can.” She turned to walk away.

“Sure thing, thanks.” Roper’s voice trailed after her as he watched her walk down the street past the bank. When he was sure she was out of earshot, he walked to the door of his office and laughed. “Jake, “Man, that’s one ugly woman. To think I just called her a lady.”

“More like a cow, a giant cow. Man, that’s one tall giant cow,” Jake laughed.

Town talk about Mildred centered on her plain appearance, a slightly prematurely receding hairline with some facial hair above her lip, muscles that showed through her dress sleeves like a man’s through his shirt, and a height that towered over a lot of the men at close to six feet. She did not take a liking to dressing herself fashionably, instead finding comfort in simple attire that served its purpose for riding Lil and overseeing ranch work. Her looks, the way she dressed, her wealth, even her relationship with Edra brought her constant criticism. It mattered not that she was generous to a fault and helped support anyone in need when occasion arose nor that she forwent more than half of the money she loaned money to when they failed to pay her back.

*

At the northeast corner of the block, business as usual was going on in Gus Spivey’s General Store when Mildred entered and was instantly taken by the aroma of cinnamon. She moved past displays of tins of biscuits and jars of hard candies and approached where Gus was piling up bolts of fabrics next to the boxes of buttons, needles, threads, and other sewing items. One of the ends of the bolts came loose, sending a bin of nails, screws, latches, and other hardware flying to the floor.

“Damn it!” He placed the bolt of cloth on a shelf then turned to see Mildred behind him. The bowtie tightened around his neck.

“Apologies, Mildred. Didn’t see you there. How can I help you?”

Gus had a kind face that suited him well. He was a pudgy man who wore circular glasses that were always slipping down his nose, and when he talked his stubby little finger would constantly have to readjust them to get the blur to disappear. He liked his work and catering to people in town and

knew no enemies, for he went out of his way to be amicable. Whereas Satchel's telegraph office brought gossip into it freely, Gus's store rarely harbored more than a few sentences passed along from customers to him. He tended to curb things from getting out of hand, with rare exceptions (of which this day was one), and he was frazzled by all the commotion. But, like Mildred, it was his habit to keep his insides to himself.

Mildred took in the mess splattered over the floor. "Take a minute to clean that up so you don't go and hurt yourself. I'll just take a look around." She was glad she had a minute to catch her breath to distract her attention from how she was feeling. She went to the display of canned goods, spices, and coffee. She took hold of a canister of tea, then walked over to take a look at the new crockery, pots, and pans Gus must have received since her last visit to town.

A crowd began to gather around the noticeboard at the end of the aisle where Gus posted the latest news, including telegrams, for the town to read. When Mildred moved into range she heard the same commotion going on, mainly women chattering, that she had heard at the telegraph office just a short while before. She quickly moved back to where Gus was after he had all but cleaned up. She picked up the canister of tea and several other items she had chosen from the shelves down on the counter.

"I think I got it all now. Thanks for your patience, Mildred." Gus looked at her and then to the crowd. "That poor guy met a bad lot."

Mildred drew in a slow breath through her nostrils, noting what she thought was a tone of sympathy in Gus's voice.

"Will this be all for you, Mildred?"

"Yes." She hesitated a moment then decided to comment on why she came in.

"That horse medicine you ordered, the wrong one arrived."

"Oh no, I'm sorry, Mildred. I don't know how that could have happened."

The din of the crowd rose. "If that guy would've been churchgoing, he wouldn't have sunk to such evil!"

"Perversion!"

"It's a mockery of God. I tell you it's a slap in the face of the Lord."

Gus noticed Mildred's distraction. "They'll be going at it for weeks over this one." He was trying to say he was sorry that there wasn't much he could do about it and wished she didn't have to hear it.

Although Gus smiled at Mildred, it did nothing to calm the feeling of nausea rising in her belly. She paid for the items she'd gathered and made her way out of the store. The crowd's words rang in her mind: *churchgoing...violating the Lord...church...* along with surfacing images of her beloved deceased father Max. Even though she never understood or questioned the wisdom of her father's aversion to going to church, Mildred had worshiped him. Her mother Sadie had spent years pleading with her husband to go until, with utter hopelessness, she gave up and let him be. Although Mildred never cared for attending church, she did continue her mother's tradition of making generous annual contributions. Josie rumored that it must be hush money. While Max was alive there were whispers around town because he did not attend but no one dared say as much to his face. After his and Sadie's death, Josie Purdue stopped being careful with her talk, persecuting Mildred at every opportunity. While Mildred was generous in helping people financially when need arose, it did not stop them from joining Josie in the shunning, ridicule, and mean-spirited gossip. No one dare butt up against Josie's forceful personality to gain an understanding of why she had such a strong distaste for Mildred, which ran deeper than jealousy, nor did they chance her wrath by disagreeing.

As she left, Mildred noted that Josie was now at the public notice-board loudly voicing her opinion. "Homosexuality is officially illegal. We didn't need England to tell us it's a vile criminal act! Shooting is too good for him."

Even though Mildred knew Josie's comment wasn't directed at her, unlike earlier times when

Josie accused her of being sinful for not attending church, she felt the sting. She had never worried about an escalation to something dangerous before, but after all she'd heard this morning, she was no longer sure. She knew Josie could no longer be ignored. As she rode back to her place soaked in sweat from worry, she tried to think of what she could do were things to get out of hand. When she passed the Whitmore's ranch, a couple of miles from her place, she had an idea. By the time she arrived home, it had percolated into a plan she was sure would work. It took her a couple of hours to convince Edra.

“*Charity creates a multitude of sins.*” OSCAR WILDE

2

While the town was still abuzz with the Wilde commotion, a singular room in Red River Park was silent—a quiet that was interrupted by deep, growling, irregular breathing coming from Emma Milpass. She lay in a semi-comatose state, just days from death’s door. Her husband Charley refused to accept the fact that Emma’s cancer had spread to her brain. She would never return to answer his prayers. And he was not about to let her go.

Charley sat vigil at Emma’s bedside, neglecting to bathe or feed himself. He washed away the sweat from her forehead and changed the rag of a diaper she wore even though it was barely soiled from the lack of fluids in her body. She was barely recognizable.

Just a few months back, they had been quite the couple, *the lookers*, he with his rugged handsome tanned face, blondish hair turning gray, angular nose and brown penetrating eyes, and she a natural beauty all her life. He was so worn from grief and worry he looked twice his age. He couldn’t bear to watch her physical deterioration, part by part, each change representing a loss of the love of his life. It started back last winter when he noticed a yellow tinge in her eyes. It wasn’t so much that he saw the change but how it made him feel, scared inside, that no matter how hard he tried to pretend it was nothing, deep down he knew differently. Week by week, what he never wanted to live through, his worst fears were reinforced as the changes screamed at him, *your wife is dying*.

While he tended to her every need, he neglected his own, forcing his brother-in-law Frank Whitmore to rally the town to help. “He needs us to go feed him,” Frank told his wife Helene. “Town folk are starting to complain that body of his smells something awful. This has to stop or he’ll be a mess on our hands when Emma’s time comes.” That was forty-eight hours before the Wilde telegram hit the town, shifting gossip away from Charley. Frank assembled close friends to bring meals and tried to get Charley to take a break to bathe. The day after the Wilde news broke, Mildred offered to help. By joining in with the efforts to assist Charley, she wanted to create an impression of interest in him to divert any suspicion that might arise about her and Edra.

Doc Nichols made his way into the bedroom where Charley stood vigil. “It’s a blessing it made its way to her brain,” he said under his breath. Two weeks earlier when Emma started to slur her speech, he knew the cancer had migrated to her brain where it would continue to grow until she lapsed into a coma, a peaceful sleep into death.

“Nonsense! What the hell are you talking about? What damn kind of blessing is that!” Charley said, without turning around to face the doctor.

“She’s peaceful, Charley. It’s better than medicine. She’ll just sleep now till...”

Charley stood, kicking his chair back. “I think you’d better be going. I can see we don’t need any of your help here!” he screamed. “Blessing, my ass!”

Nichols put a hand on Charley’s shoulder. “She’s out of her misery. Be thankful for that.”

Charley pulled back. "I don't want her to be peaceful. I want her to be alive! Like it was. Like was." He broke down in tears.

"Go on, Charley. Let it out."

Charley sank back into the chair, put his head down on Emma's chest, and let out the grief that could not find its way to daylight while she was still conscious. Nichols felt Charley tense when he put a hand on his back.

"If you was a real doctor, you could save her," Charley moaned, referring to the fact that Nichols lacked medical schooling. The only professional training he had was apprenticing with a doctor in Saint Louis where he grew up.

Nichols felt a familiar sorrow that his parents could not afford to properly educate him. He knew Charley was talking out of his grief. "Try and get a little rest now. I'll be back later."

*

The bell hanging over the front door clanged, waking Charley from a deep sleep. Disoriented, he looked around to get his bearings, when he noticed Emma breathing very shallowly. He reached over to touch her limp hand with absolutely no response from her. The bell clanged again. "Go away!" he screamed.

"Charley, I brought you some food."

A rush of anger welled up inside him. "Why can't you just leave me alone? Stay away! I don't want none of your food!"

Emma did not stir.

Mildred entered Charley's living room and set down a tray with a pot of stew of meat, onion, carrots, potatoes and gravy. In a small tin were freshly baked biscuits soaked in melted butter. "I'll bring a plate in to you," she called.

Exasperated, Charley turned away from Emma. "Just leave it there and go!"

Mildred walked to the partially open door. "I'm not leaving till you come out and eat some. How are you going to take care of Emma if you lose your strength? I'm staying right here, Charley Mil..."

The bedroom door banged open, knocking Mildred's left side. "Ouch." She stepped back.

"If you'd have left when I asked you to, you wouldn't be in my way. Now get."

Mildred absorbed how worn he looked: sullen face, disheveled clothes, and the foul odor of his body. She could not tell if his brown eyes were red from lack of sleep or crying and almost felt sorry for him. She stepped back, letting him pass. "Here. I brought you some stew and biscuits. Eat and I'll leave." She rubbed the sore spot where the door had jammed into her.

Charley walked to the food without comment and lifted the stew pot lid, then slammed it down. "I'm not hungry. Go on now, Mildred, get!"

"I'm going nowhere till you stop acting like a child and sit down and eat a bit." She put her hands on her hips and gave him a look that said she meant business.

"You folks coming over here are a pain in the butt. Can't nobody be left alone?" He scooped a spoonful of stew and took a swallow. "There."

"That's a good start. If you're that antsy to get rid of me, then eat some more and I'll leave." She pulled a chair to the table and motioned for him to sit down, patting the chair next to hers.

He sat, spooned out some stew, and began to eat while Mildred sat silently looking around. She noticed clothes thrown about over the couch in his living room, dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen, dust everywhere, cobwebs on a lamp, and to her disgust, a few rat droppings. The silence was suddenly interrupted by loud snoring noises coming from the bedroom. "Oh poor Emma," Mildred whispered.

Charley pushed his chair back, dropping his spoon to the floor, and ran to his wife. Mildred tidied the place before leaving. He never noticed the doorbell clanging as she made her way out.

"What's happening to you?" Charley took Emma's ashen face in his hands. As he gazed at her

the last hint of pink blotches left her cheeks. Her breathing grew louder and more labored until the snoring was barely audible. Instinctively, he put the side of his head right next to her mouth. He felt his heart pounding while the last faint trace of air from her lungs gently grazed his face. When there was nothing warm hitting his cheek, panic set in. He grabbed her torso and shook her while she screamed, "No! No! No! Don't leave me! Emma!"

*

Mildred was irritated as she rode back to her ranch. "How are we ever going to work this out Lil?" she mumbled to her painted horse. "That man is not making this easy."

She was annoyed with herself that she decided to help Charley but did not know what else to do. She hated drawing attention to herself and being subjected to ridicule. *She looks and acts like a man. Look at that receding hairline; she's going bald. She's a fat pig.* Even worse, she resented talk of her cousin, Edra. *What a hermit. She'll never get over what happened to her.* This she could not forgive. She knew that in devising her plan she had to swallow all this and come across as credibly as she could in showing an interest in Charley. Compared to the alternative, of doing nothing and being found out, it was a small price to pay.

Lil jerked and sped forward, snapping Mildred's attention from her frustration.

"Whoa, girl. Take it easy."

Lil had, on her own, turned up the dirt road of the ranch through the double row of pinyon pines that had been planted by Mildred's father to give privacy to the Dunlap's homestead. Clouds of dust rose to the height of the buggy seat, and Mildred wondered what was beneath all that flying dirt. It had only been two days since she had come across a rattlesnake den in a gully, just feet from where Lil was trotting. She wondered if Lil remembered this, and the other time when a rattler grabbed onto Chessie, the family's blue merle Australian Shepherd. Lil had watched that dog go down in a painful squirming death. Mildred was so distraught over the loss that she refused to get another dog. Edra, traumatized from watching it also, refused to walk anywhere near the site for weeks. Mildred reached to feel the rifle at her side and was glad that she had learned to sharp-shoot at an early age, along with Edra. *It's for protection, girls*, she recalled her father telling her and Edra while he trained them to do everything young men could do, so that they would be able to fend for themselves when the time came.

Mildred saw a dim light coming from the master bedroom window as she climbed out of the buggy and tied Lil to the hitching post outside the front door. Once inside her place, she saw a freshly baked apple pie on the dining room table, which quelled the aggravation caused by Charley's stubbornness.

"Hey Edra, you there?" she called to the bedroom.

"What took you so long? That pie is getting cold," Edra called out as she entered the living room.

Mildred saw Edra's beautiful face and shiny brown hair, dark with natural curls that fell from the tie that held it back off her neck, contrasting with her radiant green eyes. Edra's shapely figure was shown well in her Sears & Roebuck gingham dress and the simple brown lace-up shoes. "I'm glad the day's over." Mildred moved closer to her.

"Come, sit down. Let's have some pie and you can tell me about it."

“Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live.” OSCAR WILDE

3

Swirls of dusty heat rose to meet Helene Whitmore’s cool glass of brewed sage flower as she sipped outside in the setting sun. She delighted in the mildly bitter flavor when mixed with a little honey which helped to quiet her nerves. Doc Nichols told her, “The Indians have been using sage flower as a medicine for decades, to calm and relax...” She needed something to help her dark moods and preferred this to hard liquor. First time booze touched her lips at the age of twelve when she started womanhood, it was from drool spilling from her father’s mouth as he was having his way with her. He didn’t go after her because of how she looked; she was a plain thin girl, with no outstanding features. She never understood why it happened and endured years of humiliation, hiding at home to avoid others seeing her bruises, without the protection of her mother and siblings who were also victims. As Helene aged, so did her father’s violence so that by the time she was fifteen, she married the first man who showed an interest in her. Frank, also ordinary in countenance, was more interested in work than physicality.

The Whitmore children were asleep, and while the faint trace of daylight lingered, Frank Whitmore made his way to the barn to check on one of his pregnant cows. Helene welcomed the time alone, which she knew would end once Emma died.

Emma, very close to her brother Frank, begged him to take care of Charley when her time came. “I know he’s strong-willed, Frank. I know it, but you have to promise me. I don’t have long,” she had cried to her brother. “He’s a stubborn man. Keeps everything in till he’s ready to explode. You got to promise me, on your strongest word.” Frank had taken his sister’s hand and nodded his agreement.

As the sun was setting, stealing away the last moments of daylight, Frank returned. “The heifer is holding her own. But if the other one don’t spring soon, we might be in trouble. You going to head out to check on Emma now?”

Helene couldn’t ignore his parched wrinkled face from years of working the field, premature graying hair, slouched posture, and baggy coveralls. “This is really getting to you.”

“Charley’s a mess.” He paused and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “We’ll work it out. You tell my sister I can’t make it tonight.”

“I don’t think we need to be worrying about telling Emma anything. She won’t know the difference.” Helene sipped her drink.

He gave her a disgusted look. “You tell her!”

She shrunk back into herself. “Okay, settle down. I didn’t mean nothing by that.”

“If the calf come out alright, I’ll make it there tomorrow.”

✱

When Helene arrived, she found Charley in the bedroom with Emma. It took her a moment

understand what was happening. "Oh dear Lord!"

~~Charley's head was on Emma's lifeless chest, his arms around her cold limbs, the only motion his sobbing.~~

"I'll be with you soon, my Emma!" he cried. Charley lifted his head and screamed at the ceiling. "Take me! Take me now!"

*

As Mildred soaked in a hot tub that Edra had filled for her behind a partition next to the kitchen, she heard a knock at the door. "What the... Who's coming at this hour? Edra! Someone's at the door!"

Edra moved swiftly, returning a moment later to find Mildred out of the tub and wrapped in her robe. "What's going on?"

"It's Frank. He's asking if you can go to his place..."

"At this hour? I'm not going back out..."

"Emma died. He wants you to watch his children." Edra relayed that Charley's neighbor rode over to tell Frank. "Said Helene's a mess and wouldn't leave him alone."

Mildred was taken aback. "I didn't expect this so soon. Good thing I got over there today..." She hesitated to get her wits about her. "This is going to speed things up..."

"You mean the plan?" asked Edra.

"Yes. Tell Frank I'll be there in about twenty minutes." Mildred wondered about Helene's reaction.

After Mildred left, Edra made use of the still-warm bath water to ease the tension she was feeling since agreeing to go along with Mildred's idea. She did not see how the Wilde commotion would change things between them and tried to get Mildred to see her point of view, to no avail. Although it did not sit right with Edra, Mildred had been so sure, strong in her opinion that the way people were talking would impact their lives were any suspicions to form. It was the fear she sensed in Mildred that finally cinched the deal for her and she resigned herself to go along with it. She was no stranger to stress; trauma held in her cells from her brutal rape. A good soaking in the bath would help relieve her knotted muscles. She got into the water, closed her eyes and drifted back.

On a day when thirteen-year-old Mildred had gone into town with her father, her nine-year-old cousin Edra was left at home with Mildred's mother, to get over a cough. While Sadie was in the kitchen preparing supper, Edra snuck out to go to the meadow behind the Dunlap house. She loved to rest under a huge single-leaf pinyon pine tree that grew next to a bristlecone pine, their branches intertwining. In her place of sanctuary she would watch mountain bluebirds, hummingbirds, osprey, and once to her excitement, a bald eagle. She enjoyed the feel and texture of the sandstones between her fingers. It was under these trees that she met Swifty, the name she gave to a desert tortoise.

Edra knelt to the ground and reclined in a comfortable position. She looked up at the tree shading her while the exhaustion of the fever took her to sleep. She could not remember how long her eyes were closed before she was awakened by loud laughter.

"Why lookie here." The itinerant was unkempt and smelled foul.

Edra, dazed, tried to sit up. The man pushed her down with a foot to her chest, and jumped astride her, lowering his body on top of hers.

"My, you is a beauty. You been waiting here for me, darling?" He ripped at her blouse with one hand and held her firm with the other, lifted her skirt, and entered into areas she never knew could receive so much pain.

The last thing Edra remembered, before losing consciousness, was the man's face moving in on hers, his acrid breath.

It was Mildred who found her and was there for her, day and night, combing her hair, rubbing her back, filling her tub, bringing her meals, and after many months coaxing her back outside

return to the place that had once given her so much joy, now a place she feared.

~~The cooling water in the tub sent a shiver up her spine as she continued to remember. In the weeks that followed, it was Mildred's insistence then, just as now over the Wilde turbulence, that spoke to her. Mildred holding out a hand to her and saying, "Let's take a walk. You need to face this. It's for your own healing."~~

~~"Not today, Mil. I will another time. I promise."~~

~~"You've promised me that many times. Come on. I'll be at your side."~~

~~Edra broke out in a sweat when Mildred grabbed hold of her hand. She refused to move. "I can't."~~

~~Mildred tightened her grip. She then put her other hand in the pocket of the dress she was wearing and grabbed hold of the derringer nestled in there. When she pulled it out she said, "You're safe. No one is ever going to hurt you again. Do you hear me? I'll kill any bastard who puts a hand on you!"~~

~~Edra felt the weight of her legs start to move and with a racing heart followed slightly behind Mildred at a slow pace. When the trees came into view Edra stopped. "I can't go any further."~~

~~Mildred squeezed her hand and in a comforting tone said, "We're almost there. You're okay. You're going to be okay. Trust me."~~

~~Edra continued to move along with Mildred. Once upon the place where the trees intertwined Mildred caught sight of Swifty coming out of a nearby bush. "Well, look who's coming."~~

~~Edra felt a startle. "What!"~~

~~Mildred pointed to where the tortoise was creeping along a couple of feet away. "Probably taking him another two days to get to us. I bet he missed you."~~

The memory of the conversation shifting to Swifty, and how Mildred tried to cheer her up, made Edra smile. She got out of the cold water and dried herself. She thought about Mildred's urgency when describing the plan and wondered if it could work. Mildred was sure that if she showed interest in Charley by bringing food to him at Emma's bedside, it would start the gossip going. She would continue to show interest in Charley until he rejected her.

“Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it into seasons.” OSCAR
WILDE

4

In the weeks that followed Emma’s death, the people in town kept a vigil on Charley. Shifts were mustered to bring food and offer comfort. The melodrama in town was fueled by a rumor Josie started that Charley was suicidal. Mildred continued to bring him food. She could not stomach his histrionics but knew that she had to endure them. “I’m going to take Mabel Whitmore along with me today,” she told Edra.

“You can’t take a four-year-old around Charley. It’ll scare her.”

“Charley’s not going to do anything to upset his own niece.”

“I don’t know about that. That man seems out of control,” Edra insisted.

Mildred softened her voice. “Trust me.”

The buggy ride to Charley’s place consisted of an endless stream of “What’s that?” with Mabel pointing at everything her eyes set sight on and getting under Mildred’s skin something awful. It was all she could do to maintain her composure. She resisted fending off Mabel’s barrage. “Listen here, honey,” Mildred hesitated, wondering if her tone was too stern. “Your Uncle Charley has been feeling a little sad lately so we’re going to play a game with him.”

“A game! What game? I like games!”

“We’re going to play, let’s make Uncle Charley smile and laugh.” She felt silly. This was out of character for her but she wanted to deflect attention off her when they arrived, and nothing else came to mind.

“How do we play that? I never heard of that game. Tell me, Mildred.”

“Well, you see honey...”

Mabel interrupted, “Tell me! Tell me!”

Mildred’s grip tightened on the reins. “I’m trying. Settle down there a minute.”

Mabel squirmed in her seat. “I’m waiting!”

“When we get there...”

“Yes, tell me!”

“When we get there...” She drew a slow breath. “You just tell your uncle all the things that make you laugh.”

“When my feet get tickled,” Mabel chuckled.

“There you go. Let’s see how many things we can think of. Whoever makes him laugh the most is the winner.”

“When daddy tickles me on my sides.”

The view of town came into sight across the open dry desert, with a few tumbleweeds flying around the scattered pinyons. The warmth of the sun felt good, relieving some of the tension Mildred

was feeling about visiting Charley again.

~~“Yes, yes.” Mildred turned left at the corner by Gus Spivey’s General Store. “Almost there. Just be a minute now.”~~

When Mabel saw Charley’s place, she bounced with excitement. “Uncle Charley!” she screamed. “Uncle Charley, we come to play!” She ran to the front door.

“What’s all that commotion?” Charley asked Harry Peterson, sitting vigil at the side of his bed. “Can’t you people just go and let me be?” He heard another scream coming from his front porch. “Stop all that racket!” he yelled.

“Uncle Charley!”

“That sounds like a child.” Charley paused. “Sounds like Mabel,” he said to Harry.

When Harry left Charley to get the door, Mabel burst in, nearly knocking him over.

“It is you, Mabel. Who in God’s name brought you here?”

“Uncle Charley.” Mabel threw herself on the bed next to him. “Mildred brought me to play with you.” Mabel was not fazed by the fact that Charley looked old and worn with his hair in need of cutting, nor did she notice his dull brown eyes surrounded by newly formed wrinkles.

“Mildred? What the hell...”

“You said a bad word,” admonished Mabel. “My mom told me never to say a bad...”

That calmed him. “Okay, young lady.” Emma Milpass had loved her niece Mabel, a fact that was not forgotten by Charley. He also had a soft spot for her. “Mabel, your Uncle Charley here isn’t feeling well. Go and get Mildred to take you home.”

Mabel pulled a face and pouted, “I don’t want to leave.”

When Mildred approached the bedroom door, Charley shot her a look. “Mildred, you need to take Mabel back home. This is no place for my little niece to be.”

“I’m not going!” Mabel responded vehemently.

“Calm down now, Mabel,” Charley urged.

“Charley, why don’t you just get on up and we’ll all have a little snack together. Mabel has something in store for you after that.”

“Come on, Uncle Charley.” Mabel tugged at his arm until he got up. “Do you have any cookies?”

Charley begrudgingly moved to the kitchen with Mabel. “I don’t know what we got here,” he mumbled, as Harry signaled to Mildred that he was leaving.

“I’m hungry,” Mabel whined. “Here.” She opened a cabinet where Emma had kept cookies and candy for the kids who visited them and pulled out a tin of stale cookies.

“How about some tea?” Mildred suggested to Charley as she picked the kettle up off the stove, filled it with water, and started a fire.

“We gonna play a game with you, Uncle Charley,” Mabel said, biting down on a hard chocolate chip cookie.

Charley surrendered to Mabel’s exuberance. He watched while she jumped up and down with excitement and took notice of the scrapes on her banged-up knees. “How’d you get all those bruises?” he asked.

“Cranky.”

Cranky, the Whitmore’s yellow-haired mutt, was a handful. As a puppy, he had unbounded energy and was always getting into mischief chewing anything he could get in his mouth. His name was Yellow Dog until he tore Mabel’s favorite hand-sewn cotton doll to shreds. Mabel was inconsolable till Helene promised to sew another one that very same day. “*He’s just being cranky,*” Helene told Mabel while she patched together a new doll.

“*Cranky, Cranky, Cranky,*” Mabel squealed at him.

That name stayed.

Charley looked down at his niece. "What's Cranky been into now? Come here and let me have a look..."

Mildred noticed that Charley seemed to be perking up.

"That's some dog you have there, little missy." Charley patted Mabel's head. "He still running with two balls in his mouth?"

"He can do three now, Uncle Charley."

"Three balls. Well! How about that?" Charley smiled.

Mabel burst forth with stories about her play with Cranky while Mildred sat by and took it in. They stayed until Sam Larue came to relieve Mildred's watch. After taking them to her buggy, he returned to find Charley heating up water for a bath. "I won't be needing you here, Sam."

"I don't know."

Charley smiled. "What does this look like to you, Sam? I'm gonna have myself a bath. The next time when I clean myself up, this place here needs some help. Go on now. Go home to your family. I'll be okay." He saw Sam's hesitancy and continued, "Don't be worrying. It's just gonna take time."

"You sure?" Sam needed to reassure himself.

When Charley responded, he was convinced it'd be okay to leave.

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