

What Marti Knew

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May 13, 1957

Carl was thin and tall, lean as a tender birch tree. He had a dimple carved into his chin, and the length of him stretched over me like a warm blanket. His hair was sunlit waves that, when uncut, gave way to curls. Carl caressed me in places my husband never knew existed. Lovemaking awakened my soul to a place that drank up the dawn. I feel young suddenly. Everything seems more exciting after an orgasm. I never knew such things existed. I thought women had a chore to do, and the faster we faked it, and the quicker we got it over with, the better. It's sort of like the dirty dishes in the sink. You roll your sleeves up, get in there, and clean them. Women round here in Eastern Kentucky don't talk about things like sex. They talk about Tupperware and bake sales and the latest town gossip. Since Carl, I feel like a lightbulb doing unthinkable things in the darkness. In the morning light, my feet now dance across the room. They sashay or prance about with happiness in each step. I notice I'm singing while cooking. Yes, a change has come, and it's hard to be blue with this new marrow in my bones? Harold grunts at my newfound flight.

"Marti, what's gotten into you? Why are you so damn happy all the time?"

He says it like it's a crime? like his goal in life is to make his wife miserable every day of her existence. Harold feels my strength. He can feel me rising like yeasty dough, and fear overtakes him. Today, Harold walked by with his black boot and kicked Bones right good, then booted my shin right good, too. I let out a yelp, and he acted concerned. Acted like his shoe print wasn't resting on my leg and that I had inflicted my own pain.

My posture and self-worth used to fall like rain when Harold took to abuse and manipulation, but here lately, I don't even acknowledge busted lips or the bruise resting under my eye as I write these words. Harold's words hurt the most, but I am learning to block them out. Harold's words make me feel like a snail or a rabbit's foot that got tucked in a lint-filled pocket, forgotten, and waiting for luck to get free.

Evening:

Later, around sundown, after Harold had eaten his supper, slurping his beans and scrapping his fork against the plate to get every last bit of the roast juice, he gave me a slithering look. Harold was eyeing my cleavage and smiling. His smile had a sadistic curl to it that made my thighs tighten. My shin has turned a warm brown color. Harold told me he was planning to take what he said was rightfully his that evening. Harold, or Hair Lip, as I liked to call him in my head, had even learned a scripture to back up his sexual desires regardless of whether I had been bleeding all day or had a migraine beating down my head and blinding my eyes.

"The husband should give to his wife her marital rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. This here sex is your marital rights, Marti, and you like it too, don't you?"

He slinked up and went to licking my ear with his forked tongue. I cringed and placed my mind in a different place. Instead, I imagine a golden retriever licking my ear, and I picture his warm red hair, brown, golden eyes, and how his hair flips across his tail and stands proudly. Harold unbuttons my shirt and roughly grabs at a boob as if it were a football. I cringe and smell his stale breath that reeks of whiskey or some potion he's drunk.

"Marti, come on, let's go to bed, work off that roast beef."

He laughs, and I half smile and follow him to the bedroom, where I try to envision Carl. Yes, Carl is the one leading me to bed. But the two are so drastically different, and the scent of Harold is Old Spice and body odor. Carl smells woody. Clean. Harold undresses and walks to the restroom to piss. He leaves the door open, and I hear the loud sounds of urine hitting the bowl. I'm full of dread. But my options are to have sex, pretend to like it, or get more bruises. Harold stands by the side of the bed. He's aroused. I'm dry as a cotton ball. I feel his hand grab my hair and wrap it around his hand, yanking. He moves on top of me and begins thrusting roughly, groaning like a man in painful pleasure. Harold starts biting my left nipple. I don't dare scream. I learned that gives Harold more pleasure. Finally, after I fake a few pleasurable sighs, I feel the release and pray that this is the last time I must become one with Harold, but a sinking feeling tells me it's not.

After Hair Lip falls asleep (not meaning to offend anyone with a cleft palate), I walk out to the back sitting room. My rust-colored chair with honey oak arms greets me, and I fold into it. I'm comforted by my cats purring around my ankles and Bones, who is now in my lap. I light up one of Harold's cigarettes and pray he doesn't count them. I take another swig of whiskey from my coffee cup and feel the warmth of it holding me. I reach up under the chair and snag my diary from the slat where I had shoved it earlier to write a bit. Why do I write every night? Who knows. It's not like anyone will read it. If Harold ever got ahold of my diary, he'd surely kill me. Tonight, I have decided to write a poem to describe what my insides feel like.

The Rapture

His seed flew in me roughly.

Seeds ran down my thighs to hurriedly escape the secret place

He cupped my face in his hands and looked me in the eye.

I forced a sad smile.

A curled-up old leather shoe smile.

I wash in extra hot water.

Lathering places that scream louder than my vocal cords.

I imagine a sword sharp and glistening.

Harold's head rolled down the bedroom floor like a bowling ball.

And him with that dumb look on his face.

I pat myself dry and stare into the looking glass.

I'm all sunburnt and freckled-skinned.

Eyes too big for my face.

I dress and wrap my arms around myself.

I slather on cold cream.

Marti, you are altogether lovely, I say in a voice as shattered as the vanity mirror.

Fly away like a dove, I whisper.

Plan an escape.

Count the days until deer hunting season.

I brush my teeth with baking soda.

My teeth look like piano keys with a missing E.

Rest your pretty head, Miss Marti, I say to my reflection.

Things never remain the same.

One day, you'll fly away.

I look at myself intently.

?Promise??

I answer myself.

?I promise.?

June 24, 1957

Harold came home from the factory early. He'd cut his finger on a bandsaw. Carl and I were stretched out on the mattress with the window open—a breeze cooling our sweaty bodies. My feet were tucked inside Carl's thighs. We were both nakedly happy when Harold's truck barreled down the drive. Carl jumped up, grabbed his pants, whipped them on, and flew out the window carrying his shoes. Like a bolt of lightning, Carl flew. I dressed and pretended to be cleaning the bedroom. I wondered if Harold smelled the aroma of sex that lingered. I could still smell Carl on my skin and in my soul. I acted concerned over Harold's hand—a cut that sliced through his ring finger. A sign? Harold had noticed a figure running through the yard and questioned me. He was suspicious. That night, Harold broke two of my ribs and busted my lip, but I still have the memory of Carl's lips. Harold can't control my memories. I drink his whiskey while he sleeps, then wrap up my ribs. I take the ripped sheet strips and tighten them around me, tying them on the end. I wash my face and dab Vaseline on my lips.

June 30, 1957

When I was 17, Momma told me Harold was a good catch. "He owns quite a bit of land," Pa said. Harold always greeted my mom and dad with manners. He walked me to the car, opened the door, and eased me in. He told me I was pretty even though my nose was crooked. Harold took me to his grandmother's house for Sunday supper and paraded me around like his belt buckle, which displayed he'd taken 1st place at the rodeo in 1954. Trophy buckles featuring a cowboy riding a bronco with silver and gold are coveted prize awards for Kentuckians. Too bad Harold broke his back and had to stay bedridden for three months. His mother fussed and carried on. She hand-fed him soup. She gave Harold sponge baths, and his dad rolled the television into the bedroom. By the time Harold could take his brace off and walk upright, he was incredibly irritable and full of a rage that hadn't been there before, proclaimed his mother, Patsy. That is a sad excuse, in my opinion. I never treat people abusively due to the physical pain I find myself in from time to time.

September 3, 1957

Morning sickness is the worst, and it's far worse when Harold's horny. Harold's rough, and he thrusts like a hog in heat. I'm sure if it's Harold's seed, it will come out with hooves.

November 8, 1957

I can still hide my belly from the town folks, but some things are more challenging to cover, like the bruises Harold inflicts. I wear scarves to Harold's family dinners. I wear turtlenecks to church. I ask the Lord to forgive me for adultery. I remind Him that David was unfaithful, too. I think God is more forgiving than people. Harold describes God as an angry Judge who waits for a person to mess up so He can squash them. Lucky for Harold, he never thinks he sins or does anything worthy of squashing.

March 13, 1958

I buried my baby in a basket on the backside of the garden. I named him Grayson. This morning, I prayed God would kill Harold as he did the giant Goliath. I'm collecting stones. This evening, I prayed Harold would get in a fatal car crash or that he would be struck by a freight train. Afterward, I

imagined Harold drowning, being set on fire, or having a massive stroke. I then go to the creek, immerse myself in the cleansing waters, and pray for forgiveness. God have mercy! I hold my arms up to the heavens and then begin to dry-heave.

March 14, 1958

I rub my hand over the crook in my nose where Harold broke it. My nose already had a slightly aquiline bridge, my least favorite feature. My fingers linger over my jaw, then rest on my bruised neck, where he choked me over his dinner being cold on Tuesday. My hands travel to my breast and then my healing ribs that still ache when I cough. Both hands encircle the concave stomach, lingering there where Harold kicked me so hard he destroyed the life in my womb. I wonder what fresh breast milk suckled from my body would smell like on the lips of Carl's baby. I picture Carl's seed in my womb. I close my eyes and imagine dancing all night under the moon with Carl's hand on my lower back and me resting my head on his chest. I wonder what safety feels like in life. Harold can't steal my dreams or the pictures in my mind.

May 1, 1958

The first time I met Carl lingers in my mind. Harold had ordered a load of lumber for the barn. When two men pulled in the drive with a truck full, I peered out the window. They talked. Worked. Stacked wood. I surmised what other men were like. Surely, they weren't all like Harold. I hear a faint knock on the door. "Ma'am, Harold said it would be alright to get a drink of water from you. I leaned into his hazel eyes and the smile that spread across his face. Dimpled chin. Sideburns like pork chops hung onto his cheeks. "Of course, I'm Marti," I said rather shyly. Then grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water from the tap. "Here, ya go," I said reaching towards his hand. "Names, Carl. Thank you for the water." He winked and set the empty glass he had guzzled down on the counter. "You sure have a pretty smile, Miss Marti," he said and then lingered a moment. A silence that was comfortable enveloped us. I replay his words like a broken record. "You sure have a pretty smile." A month later I penned the poem, Comfortable.

I thought of a word to describe you.

Comfortable

Like a much-traveled shoe

A blanket worn and soft

A tree with old bark

A coffee cup stained

The coziness of a tattered chair

The bare path much traveled upon

Openly frank and unpredictable, yet predictable in every way

Comfortable

A rainy Monday splattered on a tin roof

The familiar whistle of the train

A song you love to hear

An orchestra of melodies upon a memory

A frayed letter never sent

A smooth hand

A promise unbent

Comfortable

A freshly fallen snow

A cozy old quilt

A warm, soothing drink of tea

An embrace that folds into one

A child's laughter

A long golden nap

A book that takes you on a voyage

A porch swing on a cool night

An uncomfortable silence wrapped up in ease

So comfortably, Comfortable.

July 6, 1958

I rested on the porch swing with Boots for a minute. Harold was much later than usual. Darkness and cricket songs filled the silence. Maybe tonight wasn't the right night for my plans. My eyes were heavy, and soon, I was curled up and sound asleep on the couch. I sleep in a fetal position. My arms crossed over my chest, and my legs tucked up tight. At some point, the slamming of the screen door catapults me upright.

"What are you doing up?"

"I'm thrown off for a bit. I was never supposed to fall asleep. Damn, I feel unprepared."

"I was waiting for you Harold. I was wondering if you were okay and where you had been," I say in the sweetest voice one can muster when conversing with Satan.

Harold stares at me for a minute. His yellowed brown eyes had a crazy look to them and one I had witnessed before--Satan on steroids.

"That's none of your business, Marti. You hear?"

He slams the front door, and the foundation rattles like my insides. I raise myself, push the hair out of my eyes, and adjust my blouse. Harold's eyes shift over me slowly.

"Damn, you look like hell, Marti." He shuffles to the bathroom to relieve himself. He is drunk. "It's now or never, I think to myself." My hands are trembling. What if I can't go through with it? I grab the butcher knife from the drawer in the kitchen and quickly slide Harold's pistol out of the drawer. The same one he has held to my head in the past when I threaten to leave him. I met him coming down the hallway. Although I missed the first shot, the second one pierced his heart, and with a shocked expression I'll never erase from my memory, he clutched his chest and started cursing me. I vowed those would be the last curses spoken over me by any man. When the cops arrived, I had a knife wound that I had self-inflicted. Blood was running down my abdomen. Harold's right hand was covered in blood, and the butcher knife lay on the floor beside him. My bruised neck and swollen jaw helped paint the scene?self-defense.

August 8, 1964

We celebrate our wedding anniversary next month. Carl got drafted to Vietnam. He will be home for Christmas. I can't wait to decorate the tree and hold Carl in my arms. I hope the war ends soon. We moved to Fort Knox, KY, last year and set up a house. A true home filled with love.

Carl and I have two sons, Carl Jr, and Hershel. Carl has green eyes and long legs like his daddy. Hershel loves to sing. They chase the chickens, the dogs, and cats and run free through the fields. Their young laughter fills my soul with joy that I never knew existed.

I have made some friends here in Fort Knox, and I am part of a quilting group. The Elizabethtown newspaper published one of my poems recently.

I'm mostly not scared any longer. Now and again, I wake up in a sweat, panting, but the more I live, the more I realize I'm strong, brave, free, forgiven, and lovely. It's astounding what love can do for a broken, shattered soul. It's like sunshine and honey?warm, sweet, and healing. Carl taught me some men are gentle and kind?even men who have committed adultery. I'm not promoting adultery, but I find it ironic that it may have saved my life. I still have my rust-colored chair with honey oak arms, and I still hide my diaries under the seat.

Boots died last spring, and we got a new kitten. The boys named him Beans.

From the Author

Marti is fictional?but her pain is real. Maybe it's your pain too, or someone you love.

I write stories that hold space for both brokenness and healing. If Marti's voice spoke to you, I'd love to share more with you.

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