The House on Saunter Street

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Part 1

The House on Saunter Street had once been the home of a wealthy family, but in some generations past the land around it had been sold for housing. The developer had gone bust and an industrial area had been established nearby, and for whatever reasons the housing that grew up on Saunter and neighboring streets was substandard. The whole area became something of a suburban slum.

The House on Saunter Street retained its wall and hedge facing the street, and it trees and fencing on the other boundaries, so that Mrs. Moncrief could shield herself from the deterioration of her surrounds. It had been suggested by many that she sell and move to a more salubrious area, but she had been born in the house and it held fond memories for her.

The walls and fences offered some protection for her, but Mrs. Moncrief discovered that the best protection for herself was poverty, or the appearance of it. She kept no cash on the premises and she had little in the way of valuables that could be stolen. There had been a few break-ins but now it was well known that it was a waste of time to go there.

She had been a beauty in her day and spent much effort on her appearance in times before. Some might still call her a handsome woman, even with her hair white and her limbs weak, but she maintained a bearing, and refused to ever stoop. She believed that posture was important.

The fence on the west side of her property was in bad condition, and so Japhet could gain access. He did it to retrieve a ball or a frisbee, but he later discovered the simple joy of sitting in the sycamore tree at the front of her property with its concealed view of the neighborhood.

She was waiting at the bottom of that tree one morning in early summer.

“You must be aware that you are trespassing on my land sitting up there?” she called out.

“I’m sorry Missus,” he called down. “I am not doing any damage. Just sitting and taking in the view.”

“Well perhaps you might make yourself useful,” she said. “When you come down come up to the house and I may have a job or two for you. A paying job.”

Japhet was always in need of a dollar, so he came down from the tree to meet Mrs. Moncrief. He was one of the few who had (as far as he knew) entered inside the House on Saunter Street.

“I have somebody who comes in to do work in the garden,” the old lady said. But I some things that need to be done inside. I am too old to move the furniture,” the lady said. “Now take off your shoes and socks when you are inside. I will get you slippers. I can guess the size.”

He left his shoes and socks on the porch and entered. The hall was large, with polished wooden floors leading to a large staircase. She led him into a large sitting room. It was all old furniture, as he expected, including glass paned cabinets and sideboards filled with porcelain and other junk. Rather than art on her walls there were so many photographs of her and her husband and of the life they had led together. He could see that she had been very attractive in her youth, and always dressed in a stylish way.

While not inclined to thievery Japhet did cast his eye about for items worth stealing just to confirm what he had been told. The television was small screen, there seemed to be no sound system, no visible liquor cabinet. It all confirmed that this was junk only. Nothing that could be sold or pawned.

He had heard of some of the local criminals who had broken in and declared that it was all junk. They would be looking for modern electronics, perhaps collectibles in a case, or works of art, but there was nothing like that.

From somewhere she had produced a few bills which she stuffed in his hand.

“Keeping the furniture in good order requires not just the strength to move it but a strong hand to do the deep polishing,” she said. And then she suddenly winced. “Is that smell coming from you? It that your jeans that smell. Take them off please. I will get you something to wear while you work.”

Japhet smiled. He had the money before he had even lifted a finger. But polishing furniture? If he did this well there could be more. What the hell? He took off the pants and but them outside the front door. When Mrs. Moncrief returned she was not carrying pants.

“What’s this?” said Japhet.

“This is a pinafore, my Dear. It is a garment for working in. It will cover your clothes. A complete wrap around smock.”

“It looks like a dress,” he said. She laughed softly at his discomfort.

“It suits you,” she said. “You have such nice legs for a boy. And so much hair on your head. But I hope that you won’t be offended when I say that you are not very clean. You should let me clean you up when you are done.

Without giving him time to view himself she had Japhet polishing the woodwork. He found that he quite enjoyed. The small of the oil was pleasant, and he could see how it made the wood come to light. Here was a task where he could see the good coming from it, and that pleased him.

After an hour Mrs. Moncreif brought him lemonade and invited him to sit.

“Slide the garment under your bottom, my Dear,” she said. “No underpants on the furniture. No creases in the garment.”

He did as he was told, and she nodded in approval. This would be easy. A little work. A cold drink. Some cash.

“Rudely I have not even asked your name?” she said.

“Japhet,” he said. “With a PH. From the Bible.”

“Of course. The third son of Noah. A worker in wood. Perhaps that is your career? What do you want to do with your life?”

“I dunno. Get rich. Do as little as possible. Have fun.”

“Only a few of us get to do those things,” she said, somewhat mysteriously. “But you may have the assets. All you need to know is how to get what you want.” She smiled at the puzzled look on his face. She said: “I know a way, but it might be too much for you to undertake.”

“Too much work?” he asked.

“No work at all. A joy in fact. Just listen to how I succeeded and follow that course if you like.”

“Will you pay me?’ he said.

“For work done, of course. To reward achievement, why not? But this would be a gift to you. My only regret is that I have no children to pass on my knowledge to. It is the only sadness in an otherwise full life.” She waved her hand at all the photographs surrounding them.

“I can come back tomorrow,” he said.

“Good. Then we can get you cleaned up and get started.”

Part 2

Mrs. Moncrief simply walked in, and it gave Japhet a start. He sat up in the bath and covered his crotch with his hands. He had been lying back and was concealing a reasonable erection.

“Hey Missus, I am naked in a bath here!”

“Don’t be stupid Japhet,” the lady scolded. “You are hiding nothing I haven’t seen, but put a facecloth over it if you are ashamed of it. And I have work to do to wash that hair of yours and get it untangled. I have the shampoo and the detangling conditioner and a special brush.”

The truth is he was a little ashamed of his penis. It was not large. It was not a great erection – easily concealed with what she offered. He let her get about washing his hair. She had been on about it. That and the need for a bath. All about the qualities that come with cleanliness.

He had been over three times including this visit, and all of her talk about self-improvement was sinking in. He wanted out of this place. She had told him that she was too old to leave, but he had a life to live, and staying in this neighborhood would destroy him. It had changed around her. She had little choice. He had.

“Only a razor will clean those legs properly,” she said to him as she massaged his scalp. “Let me get you one. Here you are.”

Was it the warmth of the bath or her fingers working on his scalp, and seeming to massage a floral perfume right into his brain? He found the razor gliding over his slim thighs, and then his shins and calves.

Next came the conditioner and the heavy tugging on his head to clear his hair of knots and tangles. He had not cut his hair for ages, not since he left the crack house where his mother still remained, trading tricks for drugs. He had moved in with his cousin Kanto, sleeping on a couch too small to stretch out on.

Where was his family? His mother loved getting high. Kanto was generous enough, but he had gang ambitions, and kids like Japhet need to stay out of sight – up on the roof or over the fence in Old Lady Moncrief’s place. He had nothing. He lived nowhere. Her hands on him felt good. Almost like love, he supposed.

“We will put it in a towel and let it dry naturally,” she said. “I have thrown out those underpants of yours. On the chair there is something to wear under your pinafore when you come downstairs. I have ordered us a special meal, and some drinks. I think that you are old enough to taste a little alcohol?”

He had been forced to drink vodka when he was younger, and he did not like it. Kanto drank beer and he sometimes joined him, but he did not like that either. But he was hungry. He stepped out to dry himself and immediately regretted that he had for some reason, shaved his legs. They itched, but there was a lotion on the chair, next to what appeared to be a pair of women’s underpants – high waisted and with panels. Of course, Mrs. Moncrief would not have anything else, so they would have to do. The lotion worked well. He looked at himself in the mirror with the pinafore on. It looked like a the reflection of a girl. He seemed to be more confused than annoyed.

He went downstairs. The sun was going down. The dining room was lit with candles on the table, along with plates and glasses. Mrs. Moncrief must have heard him. She came through the doors from the sitting room, with some clothes in her hand. He thought that she was dressed as if going to a wedding. She had a dress on with nice shoes, and her hair as arranged.

“Tonight I will introduce you to another way of life,” she said. “The choice is yours, but it would please me if you would say yes.”

“Sure, Mrs. Moncrief,” he said. “It is your house and I guess you are supplying the food and drink – right?”

“I am the hostess, yes,” she said. “Being a good hostess is a skill. You are my guest. Being a good guest is something learned too. Both are skills that you should learn. You will see that I am dressed for dinner, and here is a dress for you.”

Not dress, but “a dress”. There over her arm. In in the other hand, shoes with a heel.

“You’re kidding me,” he said.

“I am afraid that I cannot give you any instructions on how to behave a gentleman, nor do it have the clothing to do that. But the rules are the same. This is America. You are not born with class, you acquire it. And you can acquire it by learning it. Men think that money leads to class, but women know that class leads to money. Are you ready to learn?”

“What the hell,” said Japhet. “I will put that on. When do we eat?”

“While your hair dries and before I brush it for you and put it up, we will have an aperitif and canapes,” she said, smiling at his lack of comprehension. “You have so much to learn, but I have ordered in some items that may see you wishing for a better life. I hope that they do.”

The aperitif was champagne. The canapes were caviar on polenta bread, goat cheese and tapenade cups, rolled parma ham, arancini balls and stuffed mushrooms. Japhet had never heard of these things, let alone tasted them. It was all so foreign that he was prepared not to like any of it, but the truth was that it was all delicious.

And the champagne? A revelation. He said: “I have heard people talk about this stuff, like for special occasions and whatever, but now I think I understand.”

“We are drinking out of coupes, my Dear,” said Mrs. Moncrief. “These are flutes in the cabinet. Coupes or flutes. They are both for champagne, although there are other bubbling wines. In my view, nothing matches the real thing. Champagne from a particular part of France, made from two grapes only …”.

Japhet was immersing himself in flavors and sensations, and the information seemed to roll over him, but he had a retentive memory, and memories based on powerful sensations are solid.

He sat on the floor in front of her chair and while she brushed his hair and arranged it with pins.

“What is this stuff again – caviar?”

“Fish eggs – the roe of the sturgeon fish,” she said. “People will talk about lumpfish caviar, but the real thing only comes from the sturgeon. It was made so rare that most of them are now farmed in lakes.”

He rose to his feet and went over to the mirror, his coupe still in his hand held in the proper way. He looked at his hair. A young woman looked back at him – her hair in a soft bun on the top of his head.”

“I suppose that I should be wearing makeup?” he said, turning his head from side to side.

“Certainly you should,” she said. “But young women wear so much more makeup these days. You really should do a course or something. Perhaps I could arrange that?”

“But this is just for tonight – right?”

“Come through to the dining room my dear,” said Mrs. Moncrief. “You need to learn about table manners. It is a cold appetiser. Smoked salmon, with a white wine. And then beouf en croute with a wine from Bordeaux. And dessert. You have much to learn about fine food and wine.”

“I want to learn,” Japhet spun around. And then without any invitation or prompting he repeated the words “I want to learn,” but in a higher voice, as if her were a woman.

Clearly, he would not be able to return to sleep on the sofa at Kanto’s place.

Part 3

“I’m home, Mother!” Jasmine had been calling Mrs. Moncreif “Mother” of late. There was no immediate reply, so Jasmine went to the room where she now slept, so she would not have to walk upstairs. She was lying there, breathing weakly. She wore the clothes that Jasmine had helped her put on in the morning - she always insisted in being properly dress even though nobody would call in.

“Are you alright?” Jasmine went to her bedside and took her by the hand.

“Just old, my Dear. Old and tired.”

“Too tired to listen to my problems?” Jasmine asked.

Mrs. Moncrief looked at the girl she had fostered. She was so gorgeous that it made her fizz with pride. Her blonde hair now cascaded down her back. It had been a summer Sunday outing, so her dress was bright and playful, her shoes fashionable but practical, and her makeup slight, revealing the beautiful she was.

“Never,” she said, smiling with unrestrained love.

“It has reached that point with Richard, and I really don’t know what to do. I do love him. You know I do. But it seems certain to me that he will not love me when he learns the truth.”

The old woman saw the signs of tears in the eyes of her charge, but just squeezed the youthful hand with her own withered one, still manicured and with strong painted nails.

“I took your advice. We have had anal sex on the basis that my vagina will remain concealed until we are married, and of course I have given him hand and blow jobs with all your tricks – it just makes him hungry to get the real thing, which of course, I cannot give him.”

“You know that I have the money for surgery if that is what you want,” said Mrs. Moncreif, who did indeed have funds from her own marriage that she kept secret from all but Jasmine.

“But I love him, Mother. I need to be honest with him. The problem is that with his family, they will expect somebody who can bear his children, and continue the dynasty.”

“Now there is the problem with the very rich. You have done very well to land him, my Dear. I told you that you could do it. It is all about presentation. You have not only learned well but you have a natural grace. And with my late husband’s name you can claim some heritage. And then on top of that, to love him … you are very lucky. Just remember – not all natural women can give birth, but they can still be mothers.”

She saw the tears. “But it’s a lie,” spluttered Jasmine.

“Rich people are all liars. Lying and wealth go together. I should know. But how can I condemn you for honesty. Tell him if you like. In a public place but an intimate setting, and then just leave him to make it easy for him. If he truly loves you, the person you are, then he will come back begging you to forgive any doubts he might have had that you could be any less of a woman.”

“And if he doesn’t come back?”

“Then you will suffer for a while, and I will be there with you, and then you will try again. You are just too good of a catch not to win the man you want, and the man that you need. Look at yourself Jasmine. You are all class. A trophy wife, just with some exotic anatomy.” The last words made the old lady smile, and through the tears Jasmine smiled back, and leaned across to kiss her adopted mother on the forehead.

“Thank you Mother, for all that you have done for me,” she said. “I hope that I have been a good daughter for you.”

“The kind of daughter I have always wanted,” confirmed Mrs. Moncrief.

“So you never had any children of your own?” said Jasmine.

“My darling girl. I cannot have children. I was in the same position as you are, but my husband accepted me. That is what love is. All I want for you is the same.

The End

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