

Ruby's Diary

—I was homeless once.

Whether or not you choose to believe me, I once occupied a special place in a posh mansion situated in the western part of the city or what might be called the wealthiest part of the city. The property was surrounded by a low rock wall covered in ivy and bordered with pink rhododendrons and fragrant gardenias; the house itself was set in the shadow of mature trees rambling over half an acre that touched a secluded bay of the sea.

Rays of sun penetrated through the trees and shone a prism of light through the floor-to-ceiling glass that faced the ocean. It had always been my impression that they kept me away from the fading rays of the sun for my own protection.

Overall, I was well cared for and admired by many who came to visit, like a pet: brushed and groomed every week. What went wrong? Well, sit down my friend, and I'll tell you my story.

—No! Not here. Go find your own chair.

The inhabitants of this vast manor consisted of the patriarch Mr. Burke, Fritz, a stern-faced gentleman of around fifty, with penetrating steel-blue eyes that let you know who brings home the bacon; his charming wife Louise—now there's a woman who needs greater introduction; and their two children, Johnny and Nancy: hellions.

Fritz, a short form of Frederick, had a confident swagger and an arrogance to accompany. His superior station in life was evident by the clothes he wore: the starched shirts, highly polished shoes, and the quality of his brandy. He once served in the Navy reaching the rank of Lieutenant. Now he's Captain of a fifty-two-foot *Bavaria* sailboat he apparently owned and which he moored at a private yacht club. He's fond of telling everyone he signs the register simply as *Fz*, though all the staff reverently bow and call him Sir or S enior Burke. He had an eye for the pretty young girls, but nothing ever came of it, that Louise knew of.

As the years passed, I gained a level of authority in the house having occupied a prominent place in the drawing room under a print of *The Night Watch*, a Rembrandt, which I found symbolically amusing. On the wall opposite my position, a deep, warm, and mellow piano waited demurely from its specially carved alcove for someone to appreciate its grandness. Only, it was Nancy who hammered away once or twice a week in cringe-worthy practice.

There wasn't a place in the room you could hide from the penetrating eyes of the *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, a framed gicl ee of Vermeer's collection. But she wasn't the only eye in the room. I too was an eye...a red watchful eye, an immovable sentry, a spy in the midst of a large, busy room. Nothing passed that I didn't detect. But no one need have worried. Their secrets were safe with me.

Anyway, I remember this particular day well. It was Saturday, mid-morning. There was a rustling of paper, clinking of ice in a cocktail glass, a phone ringing somewhere in another room. Footsteps, soft, rubber-soled footsteps on the hardwood floor. A shrill voice, Nancy's voice, "Mother! Pick up the phone. It's Estelle."

I imagined Louise peering closely into a mirror examining the hairline creases newly formed on her brow; and putting the curling tweezers to her heavily mascaraed lashes, her cheeks a merry, smiling red, like Santa Claus, caused by a morning aperitif. "Be a dear and tell her I'm busy. I'll return her call later."

"No! Tell her yourself."

I wondered whether the child even bothered to cover the mouthpiece with her hand before snapping at her mother with such unrefined rudeness.

According to Louise, Estelle was nothing to write home about. My post-mortem on the subject concluded Louise always criticized Estelle in a way that was rooted in jaded jealousy, the pebble in her shoe, as it were. If it wasn't for Estelle's husband, Mr. Dalton, being president of the stocks and securities firm Fritz invested with, Louise would've gladly unfriended her.

Louise. I could smell the creature before she arrived in the room—a basket of fruit: sweet cherry, dark plum, soft apricot, all pasted to her body with a musky talcum. But Louise didn't just come into a room...she swept into the space, her bellows blowing a now depleted windbag of air having issued orders to an invisible servant as to where to place the rose bowl of potpourri and other such inane commands.

When it came to entertaining, money was spent lavishly as if to maintain their position in the social strata. Louise was in her element planning cocktail parties, and during these times she never really spoke to Fritz directly. It was as if he was her mannequin, a house ornament which could be manipulated at will and dusted if necessary. Her voice was a constant nattering over matters of inconsequence, and I could swear he took no notice of her as he leisurely read the morning paper. As for me, I was left out of the fray.

—Where was I? Oh, yes, the phone rang constantly on party days, like a stockbroker's desk when the Dow Jones dips.

"The McConnachie's have confirmed, and of course, the Daltons." Louise regurgitated the guest list as she swooped up an outdated copy of *Vogue*. She surveyed the room one last time looking for any imperfections.

When the evening came, Louise brushed her hands down her dress each time someone arrived; and threw open the door with exuberance, gushing with affected compliments.

"Do come in." She gave them an airbrush kiss on both cheeks, then flounced over to the bar. "Help yourself to drinks. There's sparkling water. Ah, but I see we're out of ice already." There followed brief introductions before excusing herself to the kitchen leaving her guests to assume she needed to attend to the incompetent catering staff.

The guests were mostly familiar to me, but always a few new faces were added to the list. People arrived in high spirits, chatting about sailing, the weather, and the next opera season. They mingled; they laughed, made silly gestures and swirled their red wine in bulbous stemware.

Mr. McConnachie, Michael, checked out the hors d'oeuvres and popped a shrimp in his mouth plucked from the extravagant, catered buffet. He wouldn't pass as a male escort, but pleasant enough to look at. Late forties, I guessed. Dressed as if he just came from the driving range. In his prime, judging by the way he mischievously patted the ladies' derrières and smiled with a certain boyish innocence. He too was wealthy, though I would never have pegged him as a banker or accountant, a member of one of those boring professions, yet he had the fingers of one who scrutinizes the balance sheets of the rich and famous. He toyed with the guests. After having launched into a juicy, gossipy story, he pretentiously hid behind confidentiality as his last defence to withhold the ending.

Despite Louise's assessment, I was particularly fascinated by Mrs. Dalton, the infamous Estelle, as were most males in the room to whom she threw a regal kiss. She bore a resemblance to Jane Mansfield with her healthy, pointed cleavage, red-carpet poses, and bleach-blonde hair that circled her flawless face in soft curls. What struck me most were her crimson-painted, pouty lips and the way she crushed her thighs against any male that stood close.

People came and went out of the room while others migrated to the bar for a refill amid joyful, vacuous laughter. I had seen it all: reflections in the gilt mirrors of hands brushing under the table while above the table conducting themselves according to proper social etiquette, giggling and pretending to be suave.

—But who am I to judge?

Mrs. McConnachie, Rose, beloved wife of Michael, stood admiring a black-framed lithograph as if it hung in the Louvre. It was one of Escher's explorations in optical illusions, an interior space with multiple staircases and faceless mannequin figures who carried out normal tasks in an abnormal dimension.

—Reminded me a lot of Fritz.

Frankly, the image caused me brain damage and furthermore, I think Louise took great delight in my mental torture by placing it in front of me.

As I was saying, Rose didn't appear to be the sort who flitted from gallery to gallery absorbing the brush strokes of the great Masters. More of the grilled cheese sandwich type. Come to think of it, this isn't the first time she's contemplated that sketch at length. I suspected she ran out of things to say and found looking at the painting a way of avoiding conversation. Either that or she's a snob and wanted nothing to do with the attending rabble and her husband's antics.

I also watched Louise. She involuntarily moved closer to her husband in a subtle way of setting his boundaries.

It was Estelle who flopped herself down on my lap and silently passed some gas leaving me to inhale the residual disgusting fumes. As she raised her ass, she raised her glass. “Cheers, Louise. To a great party.”

—I detected insincerity in her tone.

Reluctantly, Louise tilted her glass and nodded in acceptance. I could tell the gesture wasn’t nearly as genuine as she greeted other guests. It was the way she held the poisonous goblet—her fingers curled around the stem like the claws of a dead chicken. And when she turned away, I noticed she took a hearty gulp of her drink and set her glass down with purpose.

“Come over here,” Estelle said in a seductive voice extending her one hand to Fritz while patting my arm with the other. “Tell me, Fritz, darling, what have you been up to lately?”

A classic line if ever there was one—the type of question that really didn’t expect a specific reply. I have some irreverent memories of Estelle splayed over me, her skirt draped, thighs exposed suggesting her intentions were something more than just chewing the fat.

Fritz loosened his tie, then pulled it away from his neck and slid it into his pocket.

I’ll spare you the details of what happened next. Louise, who had been drawn away by a couple saying goodbye, returned to the room in time to see her husband in a compromising position looking sheepish and Estelle smacking her red lips and giving off a whiff of satisfaction.

Forever the charming hostess, Louise smiled at her guests, but I saw a murderous look that flashed for a second across her face. Dear Louise would not take this episode up with her husband. That was beneath her. Nobody messed around with Louise, least of all that impudent Mrs. Dalton. Though Louise had had a few drinks too many, she had the wherewithal not to pull the pistol out in public company. No, not Louise. She’d have her revenge in her own way. It could wait.

The house was scarcely awake when Louise appeared in her dressing gown and stocking feet holding a cold cloth to her head. She walked around with a sense of triumph, having taken stock of the previous evening’s events and cast her glance on me for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. She leaned over and lifted several particles of lint from my back and held them up to the light as if she were a police inspector on a murder investigation. Her lips parsed. I could sense her head was screaming, perhaps obscenities, and she was breathing hard. Her face flushed red-hot and showed elevated blood pressure.

All at once, she exploded into an exaggerated melodrama, pummeling her clenched fists into my soft cushion until I thought I would lose my innards.

—What the...?

But she didn't give a frosted fig's worth of difference. When she exhausted her frustration, she turned and went elsewhere, likely the garage judging by the noise. Something of epochal importance was brewing.

—What vulgar plot was she concocting?

Thinking back, how much was premeditated, or how much was spontaneous, I really couldn't tell, but I had a suspicion of some pending evil when she returned with work-glove covered hands and grabbed me by my arms.

—Shall I tell you what she did next?

The day began overcast, a doom and gloom day, and rain threatened. I couldn't remember ever being outside. But there I was, cast out onto the gravelled shoulder of the road that had shrunk to half a normal city street width. Beside me, leaning against the rock wall, Louise had savagely placed a piece of cardboard containing one word hastily written: FREE.

—Say whaaaa? Tell me. What have I done? For what should I feel responsible?

I've never felt so humiliated in my entire life! You can imagine I was beyond shocked. Here I was, utterly alone, abandoned, betrayed, with no source of appeal, while Louise had taken contemplated delight in ruining my life. How could she?

Slowly the fog lifted, and I understood. She would erase the unpleasant memory by getting rid of me. If I stayed, I would be a constant reminder of the loathsome Estelle, though why this was a red line when every party was consumed with testosterone, I'll never know. In retrospect, I saw no reason why she couldn't have just sold me to the Metropolitan Museum as art, or at the very least placed me in a respectable charitable consignment shop.

The leaves gathered, kissing my feet in consolation. I could smell the sea air and those prickly pine needles as they fell on my precious cardinal-red, brocade fabric.

—Oh, God no! The seagulls!

Louise had often complained about their treachery. I braved the weather. I was cold, but hope was to be had in the sun peeking through and warming the morning dew that had settled on my frame.

Each time I heard a car approach, I found myself holding my breath and counting to ten, but it didn't even pause or read the sign. After all, this was the neighbourhood of Bentleys, not lemonade stands. I saw the glory of my great heritage fading into oblivion and prayed for twenty laws of karma to rain down on Louise.

Another terror loomed. An elderly, up-market gentleman in tweeds and donning a deerstalker came walking his red-burnished chestnut setter who was actively sniffing as if he greatly desired a place to lift his leg.

—God help me, were my arms agile I'd have disembowelled the hound if he dared wet my leg.

I'm telling you now it was a nightmare out there. I endured the humiliation of passers' by bestowing their scornful looks that said, (*Harrumph*) *in this neighbourhood?* If I could, I would've committed suicide.

I can't say how long I had been on the street. Hours. A lifetime. The sun had disappeared, and evil dark clouds had once again formed over my head. I had begun to wonder if there were any Christians left in the world, when an older model, silver, middle-class edition Volvo whipped around the corner.

—What are they doing in this neck of the woods? Dollars to doughnuts they're lost.

The car appeared to accelerate as it passed by me, but then I saw the red brake lights flash. They flashed again, then held steady.

—Were they stopping? Yes!

The vehicle lunged backwards towards the hedge. The muffler crackled. The engine stopped.

—Are these good people, sweet angels from heaven, my Messiah, my Saviour? Do they hold the key to my destiny?

Two pensioners emerged. The driver wore a ball cap, clean blue jeans and a short-sleeved blue shirt. He hobbled rather than walked. I imagined him injured in a skiing competition in his younger years. He paused and looked at me through round spectacles, then began a process of thorough examination as would a doctor to a patient. English was not his first language. Eastern Europe I reckoned. Sounded almost familiar. Not that it made a bloody bit of difference, but maybe he knows the textile industry of my forefathers. The woman, dressed in black jogging pants and hoodie, stood by and more or less surveyed me with her chin cupped in her hand.

He turned around and lowered himself into my cushion and leaned back. "What do you think?" he asked her.

I began to purr.

"You look as though you are seated at the right hand of Augustus Caesar," the woman commented.

He chuckled. She took a picture of me with her phone, but I noted that their enthusiasm was petering out. Her eyes became disconcerting and her face serious, though he appeared to acknowledge my finer qualities. A gust of emotion, not one word of disapproval, but still they solemnly returned to their vehicle and slammed the doors.

—No! Come back. Why leave? I'll take a dingy corner in an over-stuffed office. On second thought...a corner in the bedroom would be nice. Wait!

The car sped away leaving a few rocks flying in its wake.

—So, it's over then. Who needs them anyway? Reprobates. Hoi polloi. What's the use? They can burn in hell for all I care. Republicans. Good riddance.

I was forsaken again, left to stare at the cascading ivy-covered trellis on the other side of the street and the foreboding sky above. And the seagulls curled up on the parapet watching, waiting. I remembered Estelle. I would be spared her flatulence warming the air around me, permeating my pillows as she plunked her arse in my face. And no more of Nancy's excruciating piano recitals, thank God. Or watching Johnny scribe filthy words in his school books or topping up the Vodka bottle with water after he nipped an ounce. And Louise coming in with that satisfied glow on her face—the unmistakable look of one who has just had a good romp.

I needed to change my focus. My mind drifted off into realms of splendour. A golden arch formed over my head to shelter me from the rain. My four legs rested on a woven stretcher hoisted on the shoulders of the Daltons and McConnachies, and I was paraded like a rajah down the red carpet rolled out in front of a cheering crowd of all the guests who had ever attended the parties. I envisioned Estelle, the culprit behind my present situation, with her feet shackled in slavish retribution, made to sweep the pine needles from my flesh and unsightly debris from my path. And I relished the thought of Louise living a life of the disadvantaged trying to build cocktails from the ruins.

All these splendid imaginings were meant to forget the sad thing that had happened to me. Truth be told, any improvement to my circumstances would be welcomed.

An ominous quiet had fallen across the street. Not a car or cyclist had passed in quite some time. Not a cat, a dog or a squirrel had wandered into my space. Even the seagulls had vanished to the sea.

At long last, driving lights winked from around the corner of the twisty road, and I thought I heard the hum of a well-oiled vehicle. I followed the sound as it grew closer and moments later, from under the drooping branches of a tamarack tree, I saw a beautiful burgundy, sport utility vehicle approaching slowly, at a creeping speed. It was as if they were looking for me. I could see their faces now, gleaming with excitement and pointing. Cautiously, the car pulled to the side and parked. I held my breath, sat upright and puffed up my fabric as best I could.

—I'm here. I'm here, I shouted.

Two women, decently clothed, one ancient, the other sprightly and young, drew near. They stood side by side examining me in silence. They pointed to my legs, pushed my cushion, and touched my arms. Not that I'm a serious student of human behaviours, but they didn't seem to be the type who scouted about for freebies on behalf of charitable societies. I was spurred to renewed optimism.

“Sit in it,” said the ancient one. So, the younger one, who had the shape of a high fashion model and was also dressed in active wear, did, and lounged back in cautious admiration.

“What do you think?”

An interminable pause.

“You know, I think it might work.”

—Work? What does she mean work? What does she think I am?

Their conversation became more enthusiastic. They looked at each other as if to answer an unspoken question.

“It might fit in the room.”

—What? How small is this room you propose to put me in? A medieval dungeon with no light and musty air? You must know I’m claustrophobic.

The younger frowned. “But the snag is: it won’t fit in my car.”

“But it’ll probably fit in mine.”

The genuinely radiant young woman could blot out all the destitute hours I’ve spent outside and decide the practical measures to be taken next. But if they are going to stand around and debate the matter much longer, I’d have to order up a thick merlot and some tapas.

“But how’ll I get it home?”

“I’ll bring it.”

The conversation was beginning to confuse me. I detected a strange suspicion in the way the two women glanced up and down the street and laughed excitedly as if they were in cahoots on some outrageously illegal activity that was about to take place. They snickered something about *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I said a quick ambiguous prayer. I wasn’t sure if it was for what I might be leaving behind or for what might lie ahead.

It happened so fast that my eyes blurred. Abruptly I was hoisted into the air and slid on my back into that cavernous space at the rear of the vehicle. I flinched as they twisted my feet.

—Look here. Go easy on me.

They pulled away. My adventure was about to enter a new phase. We hadn’t travelled far when the car came to a full stop. I listened eagerly but couldn’t make out the chatter going on. Then the hatch swung open, and I saw six keen eyes peering at me. To my utter surprise, it was the troglodyte who had first inspected me, the one with the ball cap, and his other half. So, it wasn’t serendipitous, in the cosmos, or by chance. Evidently, they all knew each other. Perhaps I’d been too prematurely relieved to have been rescued.

“Where shall we put it?”

“Well, I’ll say one thing. I’m not having it in the house,” proclaimed the other half, washing her hands of the matter.

“How about the garage?”

—Are these people insane? What kind of hospitality is this?

Just like that I was cast aside, into a place where people store their weed whacker, lumber scraps and other seldom used implements of horror. The darkness crept over me from every corner of the space while spiders scurried about weaving their webs. The place smelled distinctively of mould and garbage. I sat long hours in quiet silence interrupted occasionally by the sirens of police and ambulance vehicles piercing my skull. My heart sank into a pit of despair. This was turning out to be the saddest day of my life.

I think it was on the third day of purgatory that the garage door opened. It was the man with the round glasses. He wasn't wearing his ball cap so I could see that the hair on his head had grown sparse. The ancient one—is she still in the picture? —stood beside him, staring.

— *Excusez-moi*, but where is the charming young woman with the pretty smile?

Without so much as one word, I was yanked up and violently heaved back into the same vehicle. Other articles were piled in around me, including a suitcase, then the door closed. There was laughter, several hugs, unintelligible conversation, and the ancient one climbed in behind the wheel. Moments later, we lurched out onto the street.

It felt as though I was being driven to the ends of the earth, and, though I savoured the idea of putting distance between the Burkes and my new home, I hadn't quite expected a cross-country expedition. I had a vague awareness that we were travelling into the mountains when my ears popped, and every now and then we slowed down as we drove by the occasional town. For all I knew, we drove in circles, though, by my estimation, several hours passed before we pulled into a driveway, and once again the hatch opened.

“Hi, Mom!” There was more hugging. “You made it! How was the drive? Could you see okay with the chair in the back?”

—I swear, she was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

Once again, I was hauled out onto the pavement, this time in the middle of a driveway in a residential subdivision. My eyes squinted against the brightness that shimmered from the Mediterranean-blue sky. A quick scan told me the houses were all built in the Arts & Crafts style with sculptured gardens hugging a long curb interrupted by the flow of neat driveways. There was no salt sea air or seagulls calling; no sprawling mansions recessed behind wrought iron; no cruise ships blasting their horns as they sailed by. I inhaled the air. It was peppery hot and parchment paper dry. But I was relieved to be freed.

—Thank you for delivering me safely.

The house was modest in size but one that held good values. I was lifted inside, down a corridor that opened into a space of interconnected areas—a modern kitchen, dining space and grand sitting

room—and placed, rather roughly I might say, under a painting of the Tuscan hills, much more in keeping with my heritage.

— Ouch! Careful now.

I was rewarded with the aroma of freshly baked bread drifting through the air. And the floral scented candle—I knew it wasn't lavender. But it was sweet and fresh. By chance, was it gardenia?

Looking from one side of the space to the other, I surveyed the inventory of all that it contained. What I could see so far looked promising. The items were not heirloom possessions or *objects d'art*, but pieces selected for their decorative qualities.

The sitting room, where I now resided, boasted a vaulted ceiling, green-mist painted walls, and a row of large windows overlooking the garden area. On the wall above the window hung a huge round clock that looked like the face of a full moon. A fat couch and its equally fat companion were upholstered in chocolate brown leather but draped with blankets that protected them from two bull terriers: one white with faint Dalmatian spots on its belly; and the other brindle brown, and both came bounding through the room, their claws clacking on the hardwood floor.

—Let me tell you right now, if one of those two dogs...

Among the other furnishings, tucked in a niche beyond the dusted and polished dining table, was a credenza loaded with photographs of family, weddings, and special events that someone had taken the trouble to frame.

My own picture was starting to come together. This was the home of the pretty young woman who wanted to put me to work. I now had a name: Marissa. The ancient one's, her mother. They were standing near me, contemplating.

"You know, I think I like it there. Never mind taking it to the clinic," announced Marissa.

Ten minutes later, a husband appeared. I knew he was the husband because of how he greeted Marissa.

"Hey, what's this?" he asked, pointing directly at me.

"It's the new chair Mom and I picked up."

"Where did you buy it?"

—Oh, oh. Here it comes, the character defining moment.

Marissa was staring at the floor. After a moment of silence, it was obvious hubby wasn't going to stop with his questions, and she had to decide whether she was going to tell him the truth.

"Well...are you going to tell me?"

"A place along Marine Drive."

“A store?”

—As if that’s relevant.

“How much did it cost?”

These were honest questions, from a man’s perspective, tips likely taken from the *Field Guide to a Better Marriage*, written by a male.

Marissa’s voice could barely be heard. “It was free.”

“What?” His eyebrows rose sharply. “You picked it up off some street? How do you know it’s not infested?”

—Infested? What next?

“It’s perfectly clean.” She looked at him defiantly though her cheeks were slightly flushed. “We checked. No stains.” She picked up my cushion and patted it gently as if to show not even dust particles existed; and placed it back carefully so as not to disprove her statement.

“No! You’re not keeping it in here.”

They were all talking at once but in the end, Mom had my back.

“I like it right there. It brings some life into the room. I say it stays!”

“Fine and dandy. Wait until *my* mother hears about this! She’ll be horrified.”

—Men! They have to have the last word.

I gazed momentarily out the window then back at the people in front of me. Somehow, I felt a sense of belonging, of not being a foreigner. I thought about the Burkes and their crazy parties and wondered how I would adapt. There’d be none of that here, I could tell.