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Martha, Jerry, and Spaulding

by Scott Woods

Oak Grove, Massachusetts, Saturday, February 14, 1949

Martha Cabot accepted Daddy's peck on the forehead and watched him fling the tassels of his white-as-snow scarf over the shoulder of his charcoal greatcoat.

"Cheerio, Darling. Daddy loves you."

She couldn't do this with Daddy anymore.

Daddy said it made her special, but Betty said it was wrong, and Betty was her best friend. Betty said you were only supposed to feel special like that with your husband.

Martha settled back onto her pillows and tilted the diamonds in their midnight plush, playing with the sparkle. She'd tried to say No to Daddy tonight, but then he'd given her these beautiful earrings. And he promised he'd persuade Momma so she could get her ears pierced, as soon as she turned 15.

In her other hand was the valentine. From that boy two years ahead of her, the one everyone called Spaz. That wasn't how he signed it, though. He signed it Spaulding. Spaulding Holdfast Whittaker.

Spaulding Holdfast Whittaker. It had a nice ring. His family lived at The Roses, that huge estate on the water up at the end of Smuggler's Cove Road. Maybe she'd marry Spaulding Holdfast Whittaker someday.

Betty said Spaz was a chump, though. Plus he definitely *was* twitchy.

She mustn't tell anyone else about feeling special with Daddy. Not ever. Betty said Daddy could get into big trouble.

Boston, Ten Years Later

Jerry Aberdeen's fists clenched in spasms under the bar at The Trent Companion. He loved Martha, and she loved him. She told him so. How could she marry Spaulding Whittaker? He was a chump.

Whittaker was still carrying on, oblivious as usual to what others were feeling. So excited his tic was going nuts. "I just can't believe it, Jerry. You know I've known her since high school, and I've been trying to get her to marry me for years, and then last night out of the blue she finally said Yes!"

Maybe Martha had been leading him on. She said her Daddy was squandering her family's

fortune, and Whittaker was rich.

"Are you all right, Jerry?"

So the chump had noticed something after all.

"Is that a cut over your eye?" Whittaker continued. "You're not still prize-fighting anymore, are you? Can't you retire Kid Kaboom now that we're interns and finally getting paid?"

Hadn't noticed the right something, though. "Interns at Trent Med don't get paid that much."

"I guess not. But that's not all. Get this. Not only did Martha finally say she'd marry me, but she said we needed to do it right away. Right now. She wanted to elope! Before she changed her mind!"

Whittaker introduced them less than a month ago. On New Year's Eve at The Roses. The elegant gown, the diamond earrings with her hair up, the way she held her head poised high on her neck.

Whittaker excused himself for an incoming guest, and Martha raised a slim finger to trace the course of his crooked nose. "How'd you get this, Slugger? Don't you know when to ... move?"

Kayoed him in the first round.

"Of course, Mummy wouldn't have any of that. She arranged things with the priest at Christ Episcopal."

They'd slipped upstairs. This high society girl, who was so pure and proper in public, was a wildcat in the sack. Then she'd arranged to meet twice more since. She must love him.

"I didn't think it would ever happen. Mummy is thrilled. As you know, my brother Pynchon and his wife don't have any children. Have to carry on the proud Whittaker name, and all."

Right. So proud your old man clipped himself. Sayonara Winslow Spaulding Whittaker.

"We're getting married after the service tomorrow! You'll be a groomsman, won't you, Old Boy?"

Tomorrow! He had to see her, had to put a stop to this madness.

Whittaker didn't notice he hadn't answered. "Then we're flying to Havana for our honeymoon. Be there a week. Say, you can cover on-call, can't you? If Edwards will too? I know every other night is no picnic, but it's only for a week. I'd do it for you in my place, of course."

"Of course." Talk about insult to injury. Probably there'd be no way to see Martha at the church before the ceremony. What if he couldn't stop it in time?

"Say, Jerry. Growing up rough, like you did, you probably know quite a lot about--the birds and the bees? Care to give your old buddy some pointers?"

Pathetic. Dipshit was still a virgin. Probably thought Martha was too.

"Well, hey," Whittaker went on, "what could go wrong? After all, we'll just be doing what comes naturally."

His fists jerked again. Candyass deserved to be laid out. But it wouldn't help. Even telling him the truth wouldn't stop him. It would only blow Martha's cover, and then she'd be mad at him.

She'd said they couldn't go public, not just yet. Maybe she didn't love him.

But ... it really didn't matter either way. It was simple as a straight right cross.

Martha was the one. There'd never be anyone else. He'd have to wait--that's all there was to it.

They were simpatico.

She'd come to her senses eventually.

After all, she loved him.

The Roses, Ten Months Later

Spaulding Whittaker sighed when Martha rolled over in bed and turned her back again. He loved her dearly, always had, ever since that day she smiled at him when the fellows at school were heaping on the ridicule. A smile to set your soul free.

But they needed to talk about this. "Martha? What's the matter, Sweetheart?"

"I'm just tired tonight. Nothing's the matter."

He knew that wasn't right. Something was the matter. "It's not just tonight. It's been months and months."

"You don't get up with Roxanne like I do. And we talked about this already. I just had a baby. Before that I was pregnant. Upchucking all the time doesn't exactly put you in the mood. And then when you get big you feel all ugly and undesirable."

"You're desirable to me, Sweetheart." Although she'd gained a lot of weight in the eight months she'd carried Roxanne. And, truth be told, she hadn't lost much of it yet, if any. "Dr. Hadley says it's OK to resume a normal sex life two months after delivery. It's been two months."

"You've been speaking with Dr. Hadley?" Martha asked.

"Well, yes, is there a problem with that?"

"I'd just rather our private business stayed private."

She really hadn't answered, though, about why they weren't making love. They'd only done it those two times in Havana. And then she got pregnant right away. Still, Dr. Hadley said most couples continued to make love all during pregnancy.

He'd learned to hold on when he knew he was right. He had to, with all the fellows calling him

Spaz, or he'd have ended up like Father. He put out his hand and rested it on Martha's hip.

She squirmed a little. "Darling, do we have to talk about this more tonight? I really do need to get some sleep. Roxanne will be wanting her midnight bottle soon."

He didn't know how it was supposed to be for a woman, but Martha hadn't seemed to enjoy it very much those two times. His brother Pinch said there was supposed to be blood when the cherry popped. Maybe Martha had more experience than he thought?

"I know. But is there--is there something that I'm not doing? Something that would make it more enjoyable for you?"

Martha rolled back over and sighed. "Dearest Darling." She took his hand. "I know I should have told you before we married, but I couldn't."

"Told me? Told me what?"

"I should have, but it was just so hard on me. Before Daddy died."

"Tell me what?" Spaulding asked. "What does your father's passing have to do with our ... marital relations?"

"I don't know if I can tell you. Say you'll forgive me. Say you'll forgive me, please?"

"Of course I'll forgive you. You're my wife, and I love you. What do you need to be forgiven for?"

Tears were streaming from Martha's eyes. Whatever it was, it really upset her. He squeezed her hand tight.

"Daddy--" her voice caught "--Daddy, Daddy *did* things to me when I was little."

Omigod. "Did what?! You can't mean--"

"He told me not to tell anybody," she said.

"How *could* he! How could he--possibly--do something so--sick." The psychopath is lucky he's already dead.

"He said it was my fault he couldn't resist. That I was a bad little girl."

Omigod. Poor Martha. He reached his arms around her and held her head to his chest. "Oh Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"I'm sorry too. I want to be a good wife to you, I really do. I want to make love with you. It's just that when we did I felt so dirty, so bad and empty inside. I just couldn't stand feeling that way."

Two hours later they were still in exactly the same place. She couldn't stand it.

They might never make love again.

He'd lived without sex for 27 years. Martha was his true and only Sweetheart, and he could keep on living without it, if it was that painful for her.

But he had to think about the Whittaker family. Roxanne couldn't carry on the name. It didn't look like Pinch, dissolute as he was, would ever have children. After 300 years in America, the Whittaker name would be dead. They'd be the last of the Whittakers.

He'd never have a son. Cabot Spaulding Whittaker would never be born.

No little Cab.

Maybe it was his duty to divorce Martha even though he loved her. But it would devastate her. Devastate him, too. And Mummy wouldn't survive it. Not after what Father did.

Wouldn't do.

Martha could go for psychoanalysis. God, he hoped it would help.

If it didn't, at least he had Roxanne. She couldn't carry on the name, but she could carry on the blood.

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Scott Woods is a professor of psychiatry at Yale University and writes from East Haven, Connecticut. His short story "House For Sale" will soon appear in *The Shine Journal*. He's currently shopping a novel, "Enemy of Good," in which Martha, Jerry, and Spaulding also appear, 30 years after the events of this story.