

Unsaid

by Michael G. Ryan

Reuben met his fourth wife at the funeral for his fifth wife. There had been some trouble with the wedding paperwork—the minister, a fellow named Frank Sayer they'd known from real estate dealings, had told them at first that he was Internet ordained, but it turned out he wasn't really, and besides he hadn't filed the documentation until six months after the ceremony. But by then, Veronica couldn't remember her name anymore. She wouldn't be able to sign her consent; it was too late to do it again. So, Reuben told no one the facts, and Veronica passed through the Pearly Gates as Mrs. Reuben Holderman. Her casket was the most expensive one, gold and ivory, the one the funeral home only actually had one of, the one they showed but never expected to sell. Reuben had felt he might cry as he wrote the check, but he didn't. Instead, he tore up the bills that came from the doctors who'd failed her.

At the visitation, Barbra McEvoy didn't go up to look at Veronica. She sat in the very back, in the very last row, nearest to the French doors and the guest book. Reuben saw her there many times as he shook hands with old money and accepted cold kisses on the cheek from blue bloods. He was drawn to the way she looked, but he knew that, at their age, sexuality was a connect-the-dots exercise of guessing the way someone used to look. What stayed with him was that she looked nothing like the others, yet she carried herself as if she

belonged. She blended in, in a way he never had. And because she stayed and waited, he hurried to work his way to her.

She doesn't have much of anything, he thought but not ungraciously. He'd always been able to tell these things; they came to him automatically, habitually, grief or no grief. In his younger years, he'd known a Republican from a Democrat by the strength of his handshake and a Baptist from a Presbyterian by the cheapness of his haircut. Barbra had heavy Shar-Pei wrinkles and silver-blue tinsel hair from a drugstore bottle. Neither veil nor hat. Her handbag was a Chinese replica. Her dress plain black and mostly formless, fashioned to be generic, somewhere between department and thrift stores. In fact, it almost seemed a costume among the expensive dresses and suits. But she rose with demure poise as he approached, and she clutched one of his hands in both of hers. She wore gloves. Tomorrow, he would think she was beautiful, the dots connected, but today, he would only allow himself to think she was gracious.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked.

“No, no. Not ‘all,’” Reuben answered.

Barbra introduced herself and said, “Veronica was my daughter’s piano teacher.”

“How embarrassing for me. I didn’t even know she could play the piano. Isn’t that something?”

“Well, it was a long time ago. My daughter was just a girl. She actually died when she was fifty-four. I thought of her as just a girl then, too, but of

course she wasn't. A mother has the right to think so, don't you think? She was all I had."

As Reuben thought he might ask why she was here, all these years later, Barbra said, "Why did you choose that picture?"

He looked where she looked, at the unfinished portrait of George Washington hanging between the heavy drapes of the room's only two windows, the painting of Washington from the dollar bill. It was in a cheap, spray-painted golden frame. "Oh. That was here already. You'd think they'd hang pictures of flowers or some Thomas Kinkade piece. They didn't ask me if I wanted to take it down, so I didn't say anything. That's Gilbert Stuart."

She had never let go of his hand this whole time. She squeezed it gently now as she whispered conspiratorially to him. "That's George Washington, dear."

He laughed aloud, the first time in nine days, counting the hospital and Stockman Brothers Funeral Home together. "Ah, Miss McEvoy, believe me, this room is three-quarter deaf. You don't need to whisper."

She laughed too. It was a very hopeful sound. Tomorrow, Reuben would appreciate it; today, it made him even sadder. She said, "You never know who's paying attention."

"No, you don't," he agreed and, making his goodbyes, let go of her hand so he could move on to greet the other mourners. When he reached the front of the room again, he glanced back her way, but she had already left.

Departed, he thought. For just a moment, he felt devastated, as if he'd lost more than just Veronica and his hope for the future today.

But there was Barbra. Perhaps. He hoped.

He called her the next day. She'd left both a number and an email address in the guestbook, but since he'd retired from the board of his business, Reuben had abandoned most technology. As Veronica had said, he didn't surf the Web or watch the boob tube. He probably had no idea what was happening in the world. He could no longer even recall his own email address. Instead, he spent his time reading or making notes about the meanderings of his life—his travels, his loves, his business. He wondered on occasions, however, who would read it. Who cared.

He told himself all he wanted was to thank her for coming. He had never done this before: he and Jane had just been too young, Hilde had turned out to be a lesbian—what a blindside *that* had been, especially given that he'd once romanced the other girl—and Ivana had had ulterior motives regarding citizenship. So, he was doing what he thought was best etiquette. He dismissed the awareness that he was observing such propriety with no one else who'd attended the funeral.

“Are you any closer to all right today?” she asked.

“Well, I want to be,” Reuben answered. “It all takes time, but at our age, I feel like I shouldn’t take too long. Veronica told me one time I took so long to decide on a deli sandwich, the people behind me would die of old age.” He paused to remember, then added, “She was the one standing behind me when she said it.”

“We all say things,” Barbra said. “We don’t know always know what they mean, do we?”

“I hope I do. I want to say this. I’d like to spend some time with you, if you don’t mind me much. But I need some time still. I just don’t know anymore how much time is too much time.”

“You dear man,” she said. “Whenever you want to see me, that’ll be just fine. There’s no hurry.”

Reuben said, “I don’t know that, not really. When I was young, I was *so* immortal, Miss McEvoy. I wasted time and killed time and after Veronica, I just don’t know if I even *have* time.”

“If I could be honest,” Barbra said, “I would tell you this: you probably don’t. At least, not *enough* time. Not as much as you probably want.” She hesitated, then said, “Do you want to call me Barbra?”

Reuben said, “I do. And can I call you, Barbra, in a few weeks?”

She hesitated, and he was disappointed in himself that he could feel his entire body sag in preparation for her rejection. When she finally assented, he quickly promised to be in touch and hastily excused himself from the call for

fear she'd change her mind. He trembled as he tried to push the tiny button that would hang up the phone.

Maybe this time, he told himself.

She had an apartment in the city, but unlike the one he kept, hers was small and impersonal. He was reminded of a hotel room. It seemed staged, like a set dressing. She had a Degas painting, flowers on a table, but Reuben doubted Barbra knew what a horrible anti-Semite Degas had been, so he said nothing about the print.

Just by looking at her, he had known she was tidy, so he had correctly guessed her home would be near to immaculate. It was the neutrality of it all that surprised him. Her inexpensive tastes were to be expected, but there weren't many things in the living room that would tell him more about her. But he wanted to know; he didn't want to guess. He decided as he waited for her that he needed to remember the names of the five or six paperback romance novels on a small shelf. He wished he could write them down so he wouldn't forget. *Outlander* sounded like a science-fiction book.

"Do you read much?" Barbra asked as she emerged from another room.

"Some old science fiction," Reuben said. "Heinlein, Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke. When I was a kid, I liked them better than reality. You look wonderful, if I haven't said so."

She smiled and turned. Her skirts moved tiredly after her. “I wanted to look nice for you. What was wrong with your reality, dear?”

Reuben wondered about the wisdom of saying so, but said it anyway. “I was poor. I didn’t have two pennies to rub together.”

Taking his arm in a happily formal way, she said to him, “So was I. But that’s all in the past now, isn’t it?”

Reuben had a thought: *I know you are trying to fool me. But I have plenty money for both of us, you know. Let me take care of you. Marry me, and I’ll do it.*

Everything was moving so fast. *No*, he thought, *I am moving so fast.*

He looked at his watch, a nondescript Timex he had bought yesterday once she’d said she would love to see him. Not the Rolex. They had reservations. They were going to be late.

He could not explain adequately to himself why he didn’t want her to know he had wealth. It kept him from sharing the scattered chapters of his autobiography, for who writes so casually of vacationing in Kenya on an annual basis? He supposed, when he focused as best he could on the matter, he was fretting over the perception he was attempting to “buy” her. Yet the jig was nearly up one afternoon when Barbra arrived at his apartment early enough to encounter his maid as the young woman was leaving. They passed one another in the hallway before the elevator as Reuben stood in the doorway of his

apartment, watching. Barbra looked troubled to see the thin black woman in a formal black-and-white maid's uniform counting money as she walked, but she waited until Miss W was in the elevator and gone before she spoke.

“Was that a friend of yours, dear?”

“The colored girl? No, she's—”

Barbra, who had not interrupted him before, said, “That's not what people say now.”

Reuben spread his hands. “I'm sorry. I should say black? She's—”

“I think it's African American now.”

“I don't know for sure,” Reuben said. “If her family is from Jamaica, that wouldn't be right, either.”

She smiled as if they were having an intellectual debate. “All right. Black. I'm sorry. I interrupted you twice there. Who did you say she is?”

“It's all right. She's a housekeeper. For the building.”

“Is she yours?”

“Yes. She's everyone's.”

That seemed enough; Barbra changed topics, asked about their lunch plans (always in restaurants where she would not suspect his wealth), and Reuben did not require any further stalling tactics to buy himself time to explain the cash tip he gave Miss W every week—a hundred two-dollar bills, each bank crisp. He kept thousands of them stashed away, once meant for children and grandchildren he'd never had.

He loved her for not asking. She was either kinder or wiser than he had first thought. Or maybe she knew about his money. He hoped that wasn't it. If she loved his bank account first, she would never love him.

They slept together only once before she told him about the cancer.

“And then I'll die,” she said. “But it'll be all right. I found you. I have no one else to be with me—no children, no one. My sister and I never talk. There's just you. But you're with me. If you won't leave me, I can face anything.”

“I won't leave you, B,” he promised. He wanted to say, *I've waited so long for you. I looked hard for you in Jane and Hilde and Ivana and Veronica. They were the shadows, and you're the light. I'll never leave you, however long never really is.*

He didn't say these things.

Instead, he waited until she had fallen asleep, exhausted from their conversation that had clawed its way into the middle of the night, before he got up, went into the bathroom, and washed his face until his cheeks burned.

He hired the very best doctors, though there was no way for Barbra to know they were. It wasn't as if they came encased in gold, life-size statuettes with stethoscopes.

She cooperated with them, but in just a few days, they all stopped cooperating with her. The test results were not just bad—they were horrifying. The doctors began to talk of quality of life and temporary physical comfort. They asked if she wanted a counselor or clergy. They offered no more medical advice because medical advice, Reuben knew, was underscored by hope.

He did not cry where she could see him. He washed his face often.

“Did you get that Internet thing worked out?” Reuben asked. It was Sunday afternoon, Barbra’s favorite time of day.

“Yes,” Frank said. He’d even brought a Bible this time. “We’re all good.”

From the stark whiteness of her bed, Barbra whispered, “Can we hurry, dears?”

Reuben’s eyes were wide and finally dry, caught in the stark headlights for days now. The chamber he sat in was high in an impressive skyscraper but was oddly without windows. Shelves of untouched books with matching spines. He didn’t like the chair they had directed him to, but he was too weary to object anymore.

“What did she leave me?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The lawyer, who was British (*so a solicitor*, Reuben thought fleetingly), said, “Twenty-one point two million.”

Reuben sighed and rubbed his eyes shut. Barbra was there, smiling the way she did. *I was fooled*, he told her. *We shouldn't have been afraid to tell each other what we wanted. We should have trusted. We're just old fools afraid of their shadows, B.* When he opened them again, the assistant or paralegal or personal aide, whatever she was, tried to smile at him, but Reuben did not feel he would be smiling himself for a long time, as long as time was. He tried to smile back, but it was a lie.

“Of course,” the solicitor said, “you must understand there are relatives who may object. There’s a sister, I believe, with two grown children. They have already noted the will was revised during the peak of her illness. And as you know, your marriage would seem to be invalid—Mr. Sayer doesn’t appear to be ordained. I’m sure the sister will claim you didn’t know each other long enough to fall in love. She’s quite likely to say you’re after Ms. McEvoy’s money.”

He looked at his watch—the Timex, never again the Rolex. The funeral was in two hours. He would cry in the limousine, he supposed. His driver was a colored man with exceptional tact who knew what was best left unsaid.

“Are you all right?” the assistant asked Reuben.

He spoke again, this time making sure they heard. “What did she leave me?”