

DAN MACISAAC  
**THE WIDOW**

THE WIDOW MYLES DECIDED to walk the long way round. She would take the spur road then march down the dirt driveway to reach the Bertram farm just east of her fence line. A good throwing arm could have hurled a stone from her creaky porch and bounced it off the shake roof of her neighbor's barn. And her son, Alfie, when just a lad, had spat in a perfect arc almost that far. But more than a stout fence kept the dowager from taking a short-cut. Deep ditches sliced through the boggy fields of both Island farms. If the widow had been able to hoist herself up one of the tall cottonwoods down by the riverbend, and looked back and down over the flood plain, she would have seen a crazy quilt of crooked lines all across those holdings. Through wet, rough-cut patches of field, trenches bowed and jogged where the diggers had shovelled around outcrops of mudstone. With every soggy step, the Widow Myles was reminded of her husband's folly—in spurning the cheaper high ground as too forested—and her own rare and blameworthy indulgence in not opposing him more fiercely. He had insisted that the low land would be quicker to break—fewer trees to fall and fewer stumps to pull. At least he had a fellow fool in Hal Bertram. Both men ended up sweating much harder than their uphill neighbours, taking to picks and spades instead of axes and chains. And, in spite of all that vigorous drainage, the widow could not risk crossing the fields. In the season of her walking, almost six years since the Great War ended, the river had swollen so high and the spring rains had fallen so hard that the ditches spilled over and good soil churned into gunk. A respectable relic like Mrs. Edwina Myles couldn't be seen scrambling through a set of moats and slopping through gumbo in her second-best clothes, her calling clothes of organdy and wincey. Particularly because the task she was bent upon required some dignity. So she would be taking the long way round.

Up the sodden driveway—a rutted lane lined with dripping poplars—trod the purposeful widow. Just before she had ventured out, the steep rain had stopped. But the pot-holes in the lane were overflowing. The way was slickly treacherous. Dodging puddles, she criss-crossed the soggy centre

strip of grass, damp wetting the hem of her dark skirt and the trailing edge of her broadcloth cape. Instead of galoshes, the widow wore high-buttoned fabric boots. Left then right, she waddled, avoiding muddy water. Finally, the woman heaved up on to the Bertrams' porch like a sea lion hauling up onto a log boom.

At the time of the visit, the only Bertram at home was fresh-faced young Ruth. Seen through a rain-smearred window, the girl seemed startled—but then, with those large luminous brown eyes, she looked perpetually so, like a pine squirrel. Ruth came out quickly to greet the visitor. With a cool gaze, the widow inspected the girl closely. Under that scrutiny, appraised from head to hoof, like a filly at auction, Ruth flushed. The girl felt that she had been found wanting, although there was no sound reason for her sense of inadequacy. She believed she was not unsightly. Indeed, her big calico apron hid a winsome figure, willowy in its youth—boyish hips and small breasts smooth and firm and round as river stones. Looked over from top to toe, the girl almost felt stripped bare—though not so much as when she would hurry by the scruffy men who leaned against the posts and railings of Proctor's General Store. She would rush past the layabouts, rounding her shoulders and clutching her wicker shopping basket. Those seedy laggards stared at her with hard eyes and rumbled behind grimy fists to one another in tones too low and hoarse to be heard by her.

Twisting fidgety hands into her apron, Ruth apologized and informed the widow that her mother and father were at market and that her brother Sidney was in the low field, mucking out a trench.

“Back-breaking work that is,” sympathized her neighbour. “Though my son Alfie does it without complaint. When my man was alive and working the farm, he was up to his hips in a ditch half the time. And over in Flanders, he never left off. I'm told he died with a mattock in his hand.”

With skittish fingers, Ruth gathered still more fabric in and uttered, “Father and Mother shouldn't be too long. There's tea in the pot. Still warm under the cozy. I could get you a cup.”

The dowager threw back the hood of her broadcloth cape, showing hair wrenched into a bun dark as a lump of coal. Her locks showed no streak of silver. Obviously, the widow had sufficient vanity to apply nitrate dye. But her eyes were iron grey. There was no blacking for those. She answered, “That would be appreciated.”

“Ma'am, you're welcome to wait for them. It's stopped drizzling. Anyway, the awning doesn't leak. So you might like it out here on the verandah.

The rocker jiggles but it is, er, sturdy.”

“Or I might be more comfortable inside.”

Ruth hesitated and answered reluctantly, “Er. Yes.”

“Is your chesterfield *sturdy*?”

The girl blinked and reddened. “I didn’t mean—”

“Of course you did,” said the dowager brusquely. “You meant to spare my feelings—and your mother’s delicate furniture. But if I was determined to visit inside, I would be content with a kitchen chair.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. Ma’am.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’ll be quite comfortable here in the open air. And it’s you I’ve come to see. Not your parents or your brother. I’m sure your mother and father are still down the road a piece. From my place, I can see all your family’s comings and goings. Your parents are never back from market before four o’ clock. And your brother’s only been in the field a half hour since his last break. He won’t come barging in. So we should have enough time to chat, uninterrupted. Now about that tea—”

Ruth almost bolted back inside the house, her rope of brown hair flipping and swishing. The war widow took off her heavy cape and folded it over the railing. Her bulk was tastefully wrapped in “company” clothes of a severely stiff white blouse and a flounced navy skirt. Carefully, she squeezed her body into the rocker. The tipsy chair groaned but held. Ruth returned apronless, revealing a soft, clingy blue sweater and a neat poplin skirt. In her small but work-roughened hands, she carried a long tray with a china tea pot, sugar dish, creamer, two white cups, saucers and side plates from a set, and a platter of date squares, all arranged with geometric precision.

“Tell me. How old are you now, girl?”

Ruth was slow to answer. The dowager added impatiently, “Speak up now. I won’t bite.”

“Sixteen.”

The Widow Myles settled her broad palms on a belly rising solid and round as a rain barrel beneath that well-starched and religiously ironed blouse. Her large fingernails were neatly buffed and the moon of each nail gleamed. “At sixteen I’d been wedded for a good month. I made my vows in March, well ahead of the last frost. And I became a mother before the turn of the year.”

The girl poured tea into each cup, watching fine flecks of leaf swirl. Each cup held dark peaty water like a pool in a fen. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And you likely know my own two daughters were married off before they turned seventeen.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Around here, if you’re not spoken for before you’re out of school, you’re practically an old maid.”

In response, Ruth offered cream and sugar. She sipped warily at the pale lip of her cup then lowered the vessel slowly to its saucer.

The widow fixed her gaze on Ruth, two mounting pins piercing a swallowtail. “I’ll get right to the point,” she stated flatly. “My youngest has been under foot now for far too long. Alfie’s almost twenty-six. I’d like to see him hitched. And so would he.”

Ruth’s fingers fluttered against thin china.

The widow’s hand clamped on her cup like an iron ring around a cask. “Do you have a beau?” she prodded.

“Please, Ma’am, shouldn’t you be speaking with my parents?”

“I go right to the horse’s mouth.”

“Oh.”

The widow showed her own teeth—precise, tight and white. “Do you have any offers?”

“I—I’m not yet out of school.”

Indeed, Ruth was fond of school, and would be loath to leave it. From afar, that is, from the last desk of the farthest row in the schoolroom, she admired a certain young long-lashed schoolmaster who had cultivated in her a deep appreciation of the Brownings and the Bard of Avon. The girl knew by heart many of the exquisite lines from Sonnets from the Portuguese, and had spent many hours scanning and conning the Bard’s art. Often Ruth would chant sweet verse under her breath. Let the world’s sharpness, like a clasping knife, Shut in upon itself—. And sometimes, under the spell of fine weather, she fancied herself being compared to a summer’s day.

“You’ve not been to any dances.”

“No. Father says I’m too young.”

“I don’t hold with dances. Nothing but Fol-de-rol. But you’re not too young for the question I have. And I am taking this up with you because, if you are not willing, there’s no real use in me speaking with your father. I know how young people can be nowadays—not listening to their elders, not minding the sixth commandment.”

Ruth nipped at a dessert bar. A bit of crumb clung delightfully to her lower lip, which was moist and ruddy as a sliced strawberry.

The widow paused, and receiving no response, quoted in a stentorian tone: “Honour thy mother and thy father that thy days may be long upon the

Land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.”

Based on her Sunday school lessons, Ruth believed that the widow had mixed up the numbering of the commandments and inverted the usual order of “thy father and thy mother.” But she said not a word, tactfully returning to her square, nibbling at it. Attentively.

“My Alfie is a serious boy. He doesn’t believe in flings. And he says he’ll have you.”

Flummoxed, Ruth let the dainty drop, one corner rounded, on to her side plate. Her eyes, already overlarge like a nocturnal animal’s, widened.

She hadn’t much noticed Alfred Myles. He was a rangy man with long stringy muscles holding up long lanky bones. Though the sky in that season was often overcast, the sun, when it appeared, shone intensely on land and labourer. Like any field hand, young Alfred bore the sun’s marks. On his gangly neck and wrists he was burnt red as a boiled rock crab. To her, he was a field hand. Just part of the land. There was nothing attractive or fanciful about him.

Ruth stammered, “H-how come? I-I mean, why?”

“Surely, you know why. It is only natural. He has eyes to see. And you can’t be completely unaware—of your own charms.” Her tone was almost coaxing, like the purr of a great cat.

Ruth struggled to regain some composure, “I mean, why is it you, here, proposing? Can’t he—shouldn’t he—do his own—asking?”

“In my family, I do the asking where the asking matters,” the dowager replied.

“Oh.”

The widow’s eyebrows rose and fell. Crow’s wings. “Well?” she urged.

Ruth fell silent, thinking furiously, wishing that her brother would come sauntering up from the field. The girl knew there was a lot of clapper-claw about the widow. Ruth remembered how it was guffawed about town that before the widow’s man had left for the Great War the rooster might have ruled the roost—but the hen ruled the rooster. Mr. Myles had been hen-pecked to the point that he volunteered to fight overseas, though he was well past forty. There in Flanders was a war that he stood a chance of winning.

“Well, silence says it all,” huffed the dowager impatiently.

Ruth looked up, then pushed her chin a trifle higher, almost defiantly. “True.”

“Aren’t you a proud one! I don’t mind saying I was against it from the start. You’re just a slip of a girl. You haven’t the hips for it.”

Ruth blinked. “Pardon?”

The widow repeated, “The hips for it. For childbirth.”

The woman had spoken too bluntly; she was a bully. But the girl bit her tongue, except to say, haughtily, “I’ve a kitchen to clean.”

The widow replied in an offended tone, “I won’t stay and hinder you—or help. Let me say that my eye was always on the Marshall lass. She’s no hot-house flower. But my Alfie got me to promise to ask you—against my better judgment. My boy’s heart might be set on you. But I’ll shift him. He’ll do my bidding.”

It occurred to Ruth that the Marshall lass had the hips to spare for it, being hefty around there as a cob mare. At that thought, she almost smirked. Lotte Marshall was, like the widow herself, big as a garbage scow. And the girl held her tongue—even when the older female, rising creakily to go, took two dessert bars, uninvited, and slipped them into the commodious pocket of her broadcloth cape.

“My Alfie,” said the Widow Myles, “has a sweet tooth. He’ll need something to soothe him in his disappointment.”

Once the older woman had stepped off the verandah, Ruth collapsed into the vacated rocker, and teetered to and fro. She felt suspended between surges of emotion, between tears of outrage and gales of laughter. Nothing came forth. Somehow the movement of the rocking chair calmed her. Back and forth, the girl tilted, watching the bulky widow drift, barge-like, down the wet lane.

Midway, her neighbour, confronted by a looming puddle, shifted starboard. Then the widow stalled, perhaps pondering over how best to navigate further around the obstruction. She thrust a hand into the left pocket of her cape. Pulling out one of the squares, the widow examined it closely, turning it over with mannish fingers. Her chin appeared to quiver. Or perhaps that was a trick of tremulous light, the sky grey, still laden with raincloud. The widow lifted her cowed head and brought hand to mouth. She pushed the soft dessert bar against her teeth. Looking back at the Bertram house, she bit in fiercely.