

SHORT STORY: WHERE'S BARNABY? BY WENDY SHEEHAN

Summary: death of husband leads middle aged woman to change the direction of her life

When Muriel Perriera was fifty eight, her husband Manny, mayor of Shallow Bay, dropped dead in front of a crowd in the Elks hall. Once the shock wore off and Manny's kids went back to their own lives, Muriel took stock of her life and decided that suicide was an option. Without Manny, life was not worth living.

The kids, all five of them, were *his* kids, not hers, and couldn't care less if she lived or died. Muriel would have liked to get a job, and had once been head librarian in town, but those days were long in the past. While Manny had been mayor, one of the town departments would have taken her on, if they could have gotten past the issue of nepotism, but not now. She was old news.

Her phone seldom rang, condolence letters had dwindled, and everyone's attention was on the new mayor. Manny's kids had disappeared. Even her favorite, Barnaby, had gone back to his landscaping business. Now that the rainy days of May had caused her grass to shoot up, where was Barnaby? He'd always taken care of the lawn, now a tangled, weedy mess. She would have to get out the lawn mower and hedge trimmer and do the work herself.

Muriel realized that if she was going to kill herself, she'd have to see a lawyer about drawing up a will. She'd leave her house to the Historical Society. Her antique gem, high on the

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bluff overlooking the harbor, was worth a fortune in today's real estate market. If Manny's kids thought she'd leave the house to them, they should think again.

Muriel made herself a cup of tea and thought back to the early days of her life with Manny. His first wife had died and left him with the five kids. A grandmother, and then an aunt, had stepped in, and when they had left for their more peaceful lives, Manny went looking for a wife. She had to be mature, with no kids of her own, and a woman born and bred on the island of Shallow Bay, because she had to understand the ways of Islanders. People who lived on this cold little island off the coast of New England were a peculiar breed, difficult to define, and his wife had to be one of them. Finally, she had to have the broad back and the hefty shoulders of a workhorse.

Muriel Peyton fit the bill. He found her standing behind the circulation desk in the library. She was taking no nonsense from a group of adolescent boys that, to his surprise, included his own sons, Tony and Todd, who were snickering over pictures of naked women in a National Geographic magazine. Manny knew right away that Muriel was just what he needed.

She was forty three at the time, an old maid by Island standards, and they married quickly. She rolled up her sleeves and went to work to bring order to the chaotic Perreira household. She'd already known Barnaby, the youngest at age seven. Barnaby loved the library, and he'd spent many a cold Saturday afternoon there, huddled over a stack of picture books. When Muriel became his stepmother, he climbed onto her lap, a picture book in his hands. The poor, mother-starved little boy loved Muriel, and Muriel loved him.

Not so with the other kids. Matt, fifteen, began to hang out with a bad crowd. Sullen, angry Matt, when not in school, was at someone else's house, and when he had to be home, he walked under a black cloud. Muriel taught him how to cook, and when he was a few years older,

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a high end seafood restaurant took him on. Tony and Todd, the eleven year old twins, were a handful, sassy and rude and running all over the island looking for trouble. When Muriel tried to rein them in, they shouted, "You're not our mother! You can't tell us what to do!"

"We'll see about that," Muriel had answered.

She turned them into Tom Sawyer boys and put them to work painting the shed. There was never an end to the work that needed to be done on Manny's house, and her list of chores kept the boys busy.

Spoiled Kathy, Manny's thirteen year old princess, was Muriel's biggest challenge. No stepmother on earth could ever meet her own mother's level of beauty, patience and understanding. Muriel had overheard Kathy say to her cousin, "If Dad had to get married again, why did he have to pick that ugly old stick? She's even *older* than him!"

Older, yes, but only by two years.

Muriel set down rules, established order, and Manny backed her up every time. He'd fallen in love with his new wife, much to his surprise.

Months went by and soon Barnaby had slid off Muriel's lap, never to return. He became a cub scout and entered the world of boys, a place far more exciting than the land of picture books and fairy tales.

After five years of battles, Kathy married Michael Gomes, and was gone. Peace reigned.

When all the kids had grown up and left, Manny had sold his house and they'd moved into Muriel's small, historic home up on the bluff. Now Manny was gone, too, and she was right back where she'd started, alone, but without a job, without even a family.

Where were they all? Where was Barnaby?

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Muriel was a believer in life after death. She knew Manny awaited her on the other side. It was up to her to take that crucial step: A sip of rat poison? Jump off the bluff? An overdose of something or other? What did it matter?

A knock on the door, and there stood Mirabelle Lewis, island busybody, snoop and, as Manny had once put it, *up to no good*.

She stepped into the house. "Hello, dear, just wondering how you're doing."

They had known one another since their high school days, but they had never been friends. Mirabelle had run with a fast crowd, and had never given Muriel a second look until years passed and Muriel married the mayor.

Mirabelle made herself comfortable on the couch, and her eyes swept over the room, taking in the old beams, the paneled walls and the charming corner cupboards, all witnesses to generations of Peytons for nearly two hundred fifty years.

"What are your plans, dear?" Mirabelle asked. "Are you going to stay on here? This house must be a lot of work for you. You know, there are some lovely condos down on Water Street. I should think, at your age, you'd want to be closer to the shops."

She's up to something.

Mirabelle's husband Gus was in real estate. He'd sent his wife to test the waters, looking for a listing. This was not a social call.

"I'm staying right here, Mirabelle. I'm the same age as you, in case you've forgotten. We went through high school together, remember? Are *you* ready to live near the shops?"

"Well, no, of course not. I just thought..."

She repositioned herself on the couch.

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“What fun we had back then, in high school,” she went on. “Too bad we can’t recapture those days.”

Those days had not been fun for Muriel, and there was nothing to recapture. While Mirabelle had been out on the beach with Gus, having sex behind a sand dune, no doubt, and drinking beer, she’d spent her time buried in books.

Mirabelle got up to leave. “Well, I won’t keep you. I’m glad to see you’re doing so well. We all miss Manny, a terrible loss for the island, and for you. But you have his sons, and I’m sure Kathy is a comfort.”

Huh! If she only knew she hadn’t seen Kathy since Manny’s funeral.

After Mirabelle left, Muriel sat down to give the suicide idea further thought. A picture took root in her head: Mirabelle at her funeral telling everyone she’d been the last person to sit in the Peyton living room, and how depressed poor Muriel had seemed, what good friends they had been.

She could not let that happen, and then she heard Manny.

Whoa, girl! Don’t let Mirabelle Lewis put one over on you! Fight!

She would fight. Manny was back, but he wasn’t ready for her. There were things she had to do. The current librarian was only twenty three and had a husband in the Coast Guard, so she’d be moving on soon enough. She, Muriel, would take some courses on the mainland this summer, brush up on the new technology that had come to libraries during those fifteen years she’d been gone, taking care of Manny and his kids.

Then she heard a familiar rumble coming from her yard, and she looked out the window. Her heart swelled, for here was Barnaby, starting up the lawn mower.

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