

## **GARFIELD LANE-BY GEORGE ISHERWOOD**

### *PART ONE*

"Pity is a strong emotion," Martha Ray always told her children when they asked her why she stayed with her husband..." and then your sister, what would they say about her, if I got divorced. Judy could never get married. No decent man would have her"

What Martha Ray never said out loud was that that pity's ugly step sister was revenge.

Frank was a drunk and wrapped the Buick around a telephone pole down in Chester one night and killed that woman in the car riding with him. The lawyer got him out of all of it, but it wasn't cheap. Sure, Frank hit her when he got a few drinks in him, but worst of all, the man never earned enough money to get them off Garfield Lane. It was the first place people moved to get out of the city. Other families had risen and moved on to Penncrest or even to Devon. Martha Ray was stuck there with the kids in Mapleville in a brick house with a cellar that leaked. The kids had to bail the basement out every other month. All her stuff down there was mildewed...her Sinatra records...her book of the month club books...her ceramic powders.

Frank had his office down there. His office! Who was he kidding? Martha Ray had laughed to herself as she saw him roll his desk chair across the shallow waters to his desk. Frank pushed off from the bottom of the steps to his desk, but could he do a load of wash? Not in this lifetime. He had typewriter and his own phone down there. God knows who he talked to.

Frank probably even thought she didn't know he was up to no good on those long business trips. Weeks at a time. Frank only came back to see the children. With her it was over. She wrote the date down that she last made love to him. August 15th, 1955. Better to be alone than with a man than runs around.

Frank always turned up like a bad penny around dinner time, every two or three months.

Now that their youngest daughter was in college. She didn't see him so much, not that she minded. Frank called her fat in front of her friends. It ruined her diet. What was the use?

Then Frank turned up again and said he was just checking up on her to see how she was doing without the kids.

She let him sleep in her bed, but nothing more than sleeping. Then one morning the bed was wet. Frank was so ashamed and Martha Ray was shocked and disgusted.

"I'm so sorry, Martha Ray."

"You're pathetic. Like a baby! You can sleep up here. I'm going down to the sofa where it's drier."

The next morning she made him coffee, but Frank didn't get up.

"Don't you have to be somewhere by nine. I gotta go to work. Your coffee is in the machine. Come down and get it for yourself."

She slammed the front door and drove off to work. When she got home, the coffee was burned black.

Martha Ray went up to her bedroom.

"Aren't you getting up today, Mr Ruckerfeller?"

He just lay there crying, "I'm so sorry, Martha, so sorry."

"Well, you should be. A grown man wetting the bed like a baby. It's pathetic. It isn't normal."

"So sorry."

"I hope you don't think I am bringing your dinner up to you."

She went down stairs and fried some fish cakes but he didn't come down.

Martha Ray went upstairs again with a plate of cold fishcakes.

"You feeling any better?"

"Not really," he answered. "It hurts when I pee."

"You should see a doctor. You don't look so hot."

"I'll be better tomorrow," he said, but Frank wasn't. He started to look God awful pale. Frank used to look like Gary Cooper when he was younger. Even her mother said he looked handsome in a uniform and the man could wear clothes. He always spent a lot of money on his clothes. She had to buy hers at Korvettes.

Then her husband started moaning.

She could hear Frank crying all the way down in the living room on the sofa where she was spread out watching "Wheel of Fortune."

"Could you please be quiet. I am trying to watch this!" She called up the stairs.  
"Please!"

She could hear him upstairs moaning.

"I've asked you nice as I could, Frank. Would you mind shutting up?"

Then she went to the television set and turned up the volume as Vanna White turned her letters.

After a few weeks, she got used to it. Her husband's moaning got louder and she kept turning up the volume. She did bring him something to eat now and then. She brought him up a cup of coffee before she left for work and told him to go to the bathroom, if he felt the need to relieve himself. Maybe he needed plastic diapers.

One morning Frank told her we wanted to go to the doctor.

"You got any insurance?, cause I sure can't pay it out of what I am earning. You are just regressing and going back to your childhood."

"It hurts, Martha."

"Take an aspirin."

"A doctor"

"Next week when I get my paycheck, if that will make you feel any better."

"Thanks, Martha."

" A doctor can't help a crazy man, though."

"I'm not crazy, Martha."

"If you're not, I don't know who is, Frank. Here's your coffee." and she slammed the door and drove off to work.

Her daughter Judy came home from school that week end and started crying

when she saw her father.

"Mama, he doesn't look good at all."

"It's all in his head"

"Promise me, you'll take him to the doctor."

"Doctors aren't cheap, you know. "

"Mama!"

"I promise at the end of the month, when I get my paycheck."

Judy went back to college crying. But when the end of the month came, Martha Ray went to the Red Lobster with her girlfriend, Ethel, bought some new shoes and got her car inspected. She never knew where the money went.

She never got around to taking her husband to the doctors. She really meant to. She truly did, but she never did get around to it. "Pity is a strong emotion, " she told herself. "Would he do it for me?"

"No way, Jose!"

Frank needs a shrink more than a doctor," she thought. "He acts just like a little baby. I'll have to buy a new mattresses now. They're not cheap, even at Sears"

Her husband couldn't get up much anymore and the room began to smell real bad. She didn't like going up to him anymore. It would take gallons of Lysol to get that smell away. Martha tried opening the windows, but it was winter already. She began to hold her breathe, when she brought him up food. He got thinner and thinner, just skin and bones like someone in one of those German camps. That's when she thought Frank was going to die, but not for while yet.

" God Almighty, how will I pay off all his debts?"

She came home one dull, gray November afternoon and Frank was out for the count. He wasn't dead, but very poorly, barely breathing.

She called the ambulance. Frank died before they could get him to the hospital. Martha Ray called the kids and told them their father was dead.

She wasn't really that sad. She bought a black dress and cried alot at his funeral,

but that's what you did when your husband died.. Martha Ray's brother and his family came up from Virginia. They said they knew what she had been through and that she had been very brave. Her daughter, Judy, wouldn't look her in the face.

Frank was a failure. ..dead broke most of the time. They used to call the house for money, but at least he was the father of her children and a war veteran. She buried him in his Coast Guard uniform. The funeral director made up his face pretty well. The gray was gone. She was surprised how many friends Frank had, not that they ever helped him when he hit the skids.

Her eldest son thought the American flag folded in a triangle over his head would lie over his head for eternity when they closed the coffin. His dead father couldn't see heaven with that flag over his face.

They buried him out by City Line in a plot near his parents. Poor English immigrants from Bolton.

Martha Ray told everyone how he was in debt for thousands and how she could never pay all of it back.

"Ruined, just plain ruined."

A few days later, she talked to the insurance man and found a way to back her husband's expired life insurance.

Her son was surprised to get a postcard from St Martin.

DEAR STEVE,

HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME IN THIS SUNNY PLACE. WISH YOU WERE HERE. TODAY WE TOOK A DONKEY CART AROUND THE ISLAND. I AM SWIMMING EVERY DAY IN THE HOTEL POOL AND GETTING A GREAT TAN.

LOVE,

MOM

*PART TWO*

Revenge is a game two can play, even if one of the two is dead.

Martha Ray got back from the Caribbean and was watching TV on the sofa one night. She got a great tan, but now it was starting to peel.

" Just my luck. Those TV stars can keep it even after the vacation."

Martha Ray was fondly remembering conch fritters, when she heard something moving upstairs.

"Is that you, Frank?"

Then she laughed at herself. She was the only person in the house. Frank was dead and buried out there on City Line. She saw the coffin go in the ground. Good riddance.

"I am like some old crazy woman on the Twilight Zone," she thought to herself. "That's a line for Agnes Morehead."

Then she heard the soft moaning.

Martha Ray went upstairs and turned on the lights. She looked at her bedroom. The bed was empty with a new bed spread. She bought new mattresses with the insurance money and white lacey colonial curtains, but still she didn't like sleeping up there, even though the room now smelled of Lysol and air freshener. The room was disinfected.

After all, Frank had died up there or nearly died up there. Officially he died in the ambulance. She went back down stairs to lie down on the sofa. She was exhausted. "Wheel of Fortune" was just beginning.

Then the moaning started again this time it was louder .

"Is someone up there?"

Martha Ray went to the television set and turned up the volume. There was a quilt on the sofa and she pulled it up close around her and watched her favorite program. Vanna White was the highest paid woman on television. Just for turning letters. Some people had all the luck. Martha Ray was pretty once, was even elected May Queen in Mineral , Virginia. Just never got discovered. She looked at the pastel drawing of her daughter over the TV.

" I wonder what I ever did to Judy, that she acts so weird? Maybe she's on drugs"

She fell asleep on that sofa in the early morning.

On the weekends Martha Ray went shopping and bought new dresses and not just at Korvettes. She would wear a dress a day or two and then place the coat hanger over her bed. She would only sleep on the sofa now. She only went upstairs in the daytime, not that she was scared or anything.

She kept buying a couple dresses every weekend... mostly with Ethel, who was a size 18 and had to shop at Big Girls. They always had lunch after shopping.

The coat hangers soon covered the bed, year by year, tangled, twisted triangular and entwined on the floor, till Martha Ray couldn't open the bedroom door any more.

" Just as well. Nobody is going in there anyway. "

So many coat hangers like wish bones that would bend and never break, like question marks so tangled up, you could never remember the question in the first place, the piled high bone cemetery of her extinct marriage. Still Frank wasn't like that when he was younger. He was a good looking man when he had seen him first in that USO dance in Curtis Bay.

Then Martha Ray filled up the other upstairs rooms, but the sounds didn't stop late at night. She had nothing to feel guilty about. She had fed him and put up with him.

"Act well thy part, therein all the honor lies"

Maybe she needed a shrink, but she could never afford one. She did all that could have been expected of her. Pity is a strong emotion. Martha Ray wasn't a rich woman like Vanna White or Ada Silverman up the the street... her husband bought her a Thunderbird and just about lives in the Spa. Ada was much more attractive than her husband , Sol.

"Martha!"

Something upstairs called her name.

She just lay on the sofa watching television hoping she would fall asleep soon. She just couldn't get warm or fall asleep. She kept shivering under the embroidered quilt her mother -in -law made for her... from cold or fear? She didn't really know anymore. It wasn't usually this cold in April...just can't get warm. She crept silently into the dining room and turned the heat up and

returned to the sofa. It was nearly half past two. She had to work in the morning. She needed to sleep. Why were her hands shaking so?

"Martha, it hurts"

"Shut up, will you"

For an endless moment it was quiet.

"This is still my house!"

Silence. Martha Ray was pleased with herself. Nothing was going to scare her out of her own house. Then she heard the bed over her head creak. An upstairs door slowly opened and she heard something descending the carpeted stairs.

And Martha Ray kept shaking, hoping whatever was creeping down the steps wouldn't get her.

### *PART THREE*

The police opened the front door of 590 Garfield Lane after a neighbor, Clara La Guardia noticed the car unused after weeks and called 911.

"There were also newspapers piled up around the front door," Mrs. La Guardia told the police.

"I called her a few times but no answers, and I didn't hear her television at night. Martha used to turn it up real loud. You could hear it all the way in Media"

The Maplefield police forced the door open. The smell was so foul, the officers had to wear face masks. The coroner confirmed that the victim had been dead for weeks.

On the sofa they found a deceased white female, aged 55 with a strangely contorted face and a coathanger extended from the edge of her petrified mouth.

"Uglier than anything I ever pulled out of the Darby Creek," said Officer O' Dwyer.

"And bigger too. Death ain't ever that pretty," answered Officer Accione under his mask.

Martha Ray Godden had apparently suffered a massive heart attack a few weeks earlier.

The police found no evidence of foul play or attempted robbery, just a trail of

coat hangers leading from the sofa where the corpse was found, up the stairs to the open doorway to her bedroom.

**THE END**

**AMSTERDAM, JANUARY, 2010  
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