

The Lady in the Red Brimmed Hat

By Anna Sisler Latta

There is a place where the road rises up just before descending into the hollow of Olema. Looking right, one can see the sheen of Tomales Bay sliding all the way north. The sad half light of the November afternoon gives the hills and fields a muted sepia tone like a photograph you might find in your grandmother's attic.

I had come here to grieve. I felt I'd been cracked open like an egg and my innards had fallen splat on the earth far below. I was looking for beauty here, some piece of God, anything, that would reach into me and let me know that it was good to still be alive.

The sepia was fading to black when I arrived at Jerry's Farm House, built not long after the Civil War and painted barn red. Its porch extended across the front and the windows glowed yellow in the dark. There was a line of chattering couples and groups out the door waiting for a table. I joined them. I had almost made it to the young, long-haired hostess with glinty, dangling earrings when there was a tap on my shoulder.

"Are you alone?"

I turned. Her blue eyes perked up at me from under the brim of a Christmas-red baseball cap, silver permed hair sticking out on either side of her face. Her red jacket glowed in the light.

"We'll get a table faster if there are two of us. Let's have dinner together."

In five minutes we were seated in one of the crowded warm rooms in the warren of the old house, which buzzed with friendly noise and the clinking of glasses.

"My name is Bella. What's yours?" And then, "Well, Anne, what brings you out today?"

So I told her. I told her what had been pouring out of me to my friends, my therapist, and even, just after it happened, to a totally strange woman sitting next to me on the Jitney all the way from Sag Harbor to 68th Street in New York. I told her that my beloved second husband, the man I thought I'd finally found that I could rely on, who charmed me, who charmed my friends with his bigness, his spontaneous joie de vivre, his wisdom, his generosity, his love, turned out to be a swindler who ran a Ponzi Scheme on me, my family, my friends, some of my clients. All of my feelings of being loved had been false, had been based on an act, an act of treachery.

"The worst part is I still love him." I took a breath and a gulp of wine. "You don't stop loving someone because he's done something heinous. No one understands this. It's like driving a car at 60 miles per hours – when you slam on the brakes it's not an instant stop. It takes time to slow down no matter how much you want to stop." I looked at her expectantly.

The lady in the red brimmed hat listened to all of this. After a moment she said “My husband of thirty years ran off with my best friend of thirty years. They’re in L.A. so I came up here to be near my son.”

I reached across the table to touch her hand, ready to commiserate, to share more. “But,” she said, “I’m not going to let what they did define the rest of my life. I’m moving on and putting this in my past now.” She picked up her wine glass and looked at me. She sounded so enlightened, so wise. I felt somewhat rebuked. I’d intended to continue my story, hear more of hers but this stopped me.

Then she said, “May they rot in hell.”

I was so surprised I started to laugh and sprayed my mouthful of chardonnay across the table.

“And your husband can rot in hell, too!” She started to laugh and we laughed until tears came out of our eyes, slapping and banging on the table and spraying chardonnay.

“Do you like to sing?” Without waiting for an answer she got up, grabbed her wine. “Come on.”

We sat in the hanging swing on the front porch, the light from the dining room window shining on our backs. We started with “Ohhhhhh, Oklahoma where the wind comes sweepin’ down the plain.” We went on to “The hills are alive with the Sound of Music,” “Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets,” “Bali Hai”, “Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair and send him on his way,” “Ol’ Man River,” we steered clear of “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” but went for “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.”

Friendly people went in and out of the front door; no one seemed to mind the two ladies swinging and singing on the porch and we didn’t care. We both had clear voices and could carry a tune and best of all, knew all the words. We sang out into the night unfurling our flags of independence like two mocking birds, switching songs and rhythms at will. We ended with “Luck be a Lady Tonight. Luck, if you’ve ever been a lady, Luck be a lady tonight!” We set our wine glasses down and took each other’s hands. We held on for a minute looking at each other, and then she disappeared into the darkness of the parking lot.

I never saw the lady in the red-brimmed hat again. But I’ve never forgotten that winter’s evening. Was she an angel? Was I her angel? I don’t know, but she reminded me that somehow we get through. I’d like to say I’ve forgotten my sorrow, but I haven’t. It’s been many years. I mourn a little still, not for long, maybe fleeting, but it’s there. And I always hear her words, “I’m not going to let what he did define the rest of my life!”

And then, a small, impish voice says, “May he rot in hell.”