

## *Marian by Moonlight*

I met Marian when my husband and I came to our present church. She was by no means one of the first I'd met as the pews were quite full and brimming with curious congregants wanting to check-out my husband and me—the new minister and his wife. Many glad hands and smiling faces would present themselves before Marian's. She was graceful that way; patient and graceful, as I'd soon come to see.

Marian was in her eighties, a widow and an introvert who'd sit by herself in the back of the church, always on the pulpit side. Due to a bad hip, she walked with a cane and once in the reception hall after the service, she'd sit in a chair off to the side and quietly sip her coffee. Often a good soul would wander over, finding something to chat about—the weather or the sermon. Marian was a deep thinker and—combined with her introverted nature—she was an island upon which most people dared not step.

As the new pastor's wife, I was tacitly expected to join the congregation in the Fellowship Hall—though I saw the chatty mass as a gauntlet of sorts; a trial I had to endure every Sunday for the sake of congregational harmony. I'd often find myself stalling down in the nursery as I retrieved my children after the service. Then I'd buy some lingering time in the hallway meeting the other young mothers who'd come for their children. Finally, I'd resolve to face the crowd upstairs. Taking a deep breath, I'd enter the hall with a smile on my face, warmly greeting anyone who approached; *my past-life acting prowess resurrected every Sunday—performance at eleven.*

It wasn't long before Marian became my personal refuge. After securing a cup of coffee, I'd head in her direction though invariably I'd be stopped two or three times by people either saying hello or wanting to see the children. Marian would smile with a knowing glint in her eye at such interruptions and she would chuckle as she observed my—at times—clumsy extrications so I could reach the safety of her home-base.

We never said much. It was always a simple conversation with plenty of interruptions as the kids made demands on my attention and other congregants crashed our "Introverts Party of Two." I regret that I never got to know Marian well before my involvement with the church increased and, with that, my discomfort decreased proportionately. My kids grew older, my responsibilities deepened and Marian faded.

It was only two or three years later that my husband arrived home after work and shared that Marian had been killed in a car accident that afternoon. It was suspected that she'd had a heart attack while driving and her van hit a tree. I was deeply saddened by this news and though life went on in our house that afternoon—dinner was prepared, the mail sorted, children attended to—Marian remained on my mind and in my heart. My husband took off after dinner—meetings and counseling sessions were regular weeknight occurrences—and after the kids were settled in their beds, I sat down at the piano as I did every night.

My children had come to expect a bedtime recital and often they'd request certain pieces; Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude* was a favorite of my son's as the thunderstorm excited him enormously and my daughter's favorite was Debussy's *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*. I played two or three pieces from the usual round-up. My nightly repertoire was drawn from pieces I'd learned in my youth or new pieces I was studying with a professor from a local college.

That night I thought of Marian. Music had always been my primary form of expression and this time and space seemed appointed for my private grievance over her death. I reflected on how I'd immediately taken to her; the affection and intimate connection was such a rarity in my relatively isolated life. I lamented the recent distance brought on by family life in full volume. Memories broke like waves over the undulating rhythms. Then I wondered-- did she die immediately? Had she felt any pain? I challenged God that surely he'd had mercy on her, that she was unaware of the horror of the crash. And I thanked him for giving me Marian, a kindred soul in a world of strangers. Lastly, I was regretful, if not ashamed. I implicated myself before the eyes of God and confessed that I had squandered my opportunity to know her more intimately.

The realities of the night ahead fell like a pall as I sounded the final note—there was laundry, the last of the dinner dishes to be washed. Solemnly, I closed my music book. As I stood, I was gently enveloped by an inexplicable yet profoundly benevolent entity—invisible and soundless—yet as real a presence as any human I've encountered. I was told to sit back down and play Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. It was no audible voice. It was rather the shadow of a voice—my own voice. That inner voice that tells me I've forgotten to put the garbage out or tries in earnest to remember the first line of a poem. Yet I'd understood this directive came not from within. It was an exchange. I'd been addressed by an "Other" and I had not the courage or inclination to deny it. I was not one to believe in metaphysical phenomena and I went along only under the auspices of my rational mind which defined it as a mere urge.

*Moonlight Sonata* was an easy find as I kept a large collection of pieces in a basket by the bench. While my muscles knew every note, my mind struggled to comprehend the meaning of this seemingly senseless exercise. Yet as I played, my mind relinquished its struggle and was calmed by the repetitive middle voice, the plaintive melody of the treble and the soft somber bass. When I finished, I felt I'd taken part in something sublime and ineffable. I imagined sharing this with my husband upon his return yet the farther I got from the moment, the more impossible it seemed that I could ever explain this to anyone. As my evening progressed, my romanticism was subsumed by reason. My pragmatic nature prevailed, concluding that the entire experience had been a self-invented, sentimental divergence to mourn Marian in my own way.

The following Sunday afternoon was Marian's memorial service. It was sparsely attended as one might've expected. Though I generally avoid funerals, I'd hired a sitter and sat in the back—pulpit side—in homage to Marian. Marian's daughters spoke of their mother as a warm, albeit shy, pre-school teacher who, in the 1950s, could be seen in our small village as a veritable Pied Piper, leading neat little lines of four-year-olds

through the village park to scout out the new spring daffodils or to just sit under a large oak and hear a story. They confessed their mother's more intimate love of music and her fond memories of her father, who'd played the piano. And they spoke of her beloved gardens, lush perennials growing in the back of their gingerbread home; how the soft shades of purple and white were interspersed among clusters of fiery lilies and red peonies.

Like Marian, I'd been a preschool teacher; I'd majored in music. I'd never understood the depth of our similarity but I wasn't surprised—really. It seemed only natural that we would find similar joys in life.

The service ended and my husband offered a benediction. As he descended the center aisle of the sanctuary, the organist uncharacteristically left the organ console and walked to the Steinway on the other side of the chancel. He sat and began the postlude. It was *Moonlight Sonata*.

I remained in my pew long after the small gathering had recessed to the narthex. My mind puzzled out a million different scenarios to explain this. Was he moved—as I had been—to play *Moonlight Sonata*? Or, is it just a playful coincidence? I took inventory of my memories; had she ever spoken of the piece? I could find no memory.

Ultimately my mind was humbled—stunned really—by a deeper intelligence that instructed me to just *be* with this. I sighed deeply, releasing the doubt and the questions. All that remained was peace and a delicious humor at the thought of the old gal, my treasured friend. We'd had a moment—Marian and I; me, grounded in my earthly trappings and she, an unfettered butterfly. I smiled at our secret and possessively clutched it to my heart.

*Yes. I thought. So, this is God...*

I looked about and basked in the solitude of the sanctuary, save for the organist who played the final chord and bowed his head in respect. I approached him with the care one might appoint to an apparition who suddenly appears in the corner of the bedroom and asked “Why did you play *Moonlight Sonata*?” The ego had all but surrendered the search for that elusive yet rational explanation that would firmly re-root me back in the temporal world.

But the organist simply offered, “The family requested it. It was her favorite piece.”