

DESSERTS

Maureen McCoy

WHEN HE DUMPED his wife for the Barbados girlfriend, his guilt was so great that every single hair on his body fell out. The disease has a name and it has something to do with men and sex. I never asked, but I wondered if it happened all at once or what. Did he get out of bed one day and find he had left a hairy outline of his body behind on the sheet? Or was it a gradual thing over a period of days: did he leave trails on the carpet and drop tufts onto his potatoes? It wasn't the kind of thing you asked, of course. Not me, anyway. He was family, my husband's brother, so I went along.

He was lucky to have that light freckly kind of skin that doesn't sprout much in the way of chest hairs anyway, the kind of skin that blends little thin hairs along the forearms with the freckles. Looking at him, you'd think he just had dry hair, his wig seemed so real. At night I said to Kev I had heard of this thing years ago, reading the James Bond books. There was a hairless villain in one book. He answered angrily that I was talking suspicious, but I said no, it's just that I remembered the book as one I didn't like. It was short and it used 'I' all the way through instead of just telling about James Bond. He said to go to sleep, would I please?

But I could hear them, the brother and his Barbados girlfriend still drinking wine and talking too loud downstairs. Her voice sounded like a clacking uneven sort of music. Her English was hard for me to understand. She looked strange and out of place here.

We had pulled in from Community Hall meeting and here was Mick standing in front of our place, hands on his hips, surveying the forests all around our house.

"Surprise, Kev, surprise," he yelled at my husband. "Traveling through." Then he swung his arms at the outhouse down our path and like he was flushing an animal from the woods he called, "Maruca, Maruca."

She could've been a doe sprinting from the pines, brown and leggy and big eyed. She looked young to me, too, and I admit I felt a little prejudiced right off: I'd already heard about Mick's hair falling out when he met her. She was smiling, innocent now, but the fact remains that she had been messing around with a married man, something I didn't like. Later Mick told

Kev that his divorce was final. His kids stayed with their mother and he flew Maruca to the States to travel with him.

The county fair was here in three days and I had promised to set up a stand of my baked goods. I've already won lots of blue ribbons, that's not what draws me. I make money and have a ball; everyone stops by to chat, though in recent years the effort has nearly done me in. I said to Kev it was lucky I'd been to the chiropractor for treatment just last week or I couldn't have stood the tension of visitors at all. You see, I learned fast that this Mick and Maruca were hard pressed to ever leave my kitchen table and the case of berry wines they'd picked up at a tourist place along their way up the shore. The first day I didn't mind too much; I supposed the traveling had worn them out. They weren't up until noon and I got a good batch of yellow pound cakes cooling, so I took a break and sat with them, but their breakfast stretched on to afternoon wine drinking, and I didn't think they cared one way or another about me being there, especially her. They were settled in good by the time Kev was home from work, weary as always. He went upstairs at nine-thirty like he does.

I sat down with them again. It was a good time to pit the cherries we had bought over in Wisconsin; it gave me something to do. They were onto dandelion wine that night, and she could hardly take her eyes off my husband's brother. I might as well have been invisible until Mick said, "We're going to play a game now. You play too. Time for word power, Maruca, dear."

He taught school and they liked a word game in a certain magazine. I listened and nodded, kept pitting cherries as they played. He missed one word; she and I each missed three. I couldn't get over the way this Maruca looked just like an animal caged indoors; her color was wrong under electric lights. She rapped her brown knuckles on the table as she thought up the word definitions and she wound her bare legs around the chair. The nights are cool here, something she couldn't have been prepared for, and when she put the sweater I gave her around her shoulders, she looked ridiculous. You know, she hadn't gotten to look the way she did—brown like that—from wearing sweaters, and neither had her ancestors. Generations of sun had made her a certain way.

I was lucky even to be up I told my husband when his alarm woke us the next morning. I reminded him of the last chiropractic visit when my doctor recommended two weeks' bedrest. (If I wanted to read he said to hold the book straight over me. I wasn't to move my head at all.) My husband mumbled—he's not usually too cranky in the morning, just a little. I said why didn't he get his back cracked like the Lake Superior dock workers do Friday nights in town? He said he didn't need medicine for the hundredth time, ok?

I got up to pack his lunch. The men were doing a little logging out behind the camps he works at, clearing off land to build on a new row of summer cabins. I was sure a back-cracking would be a help to him.

Well, at noon on the dot I had the oven full with four loaves of fruit bread and four more setting out in pans ready to go next. This was the recipe even Dora Helgrun from the bakery wants, but I won't give it up. The lovebirds got up then. Now, I'm not saying there isn't room for two or even three in my kitchen at once. After all, we have a table in the nook there, but having an outhouse means the kitchen sink, mirror, and medicine cabinet Kev installed are the same as bathroom things. I'm trying to keep dishes washed as I go and here comes Miss Barbados butting in my way so she can stand in the mirror and rub cream onto her skin. I stood back politely. She must have woken up laughing; she laughed at everything my husband's brother said. Laugh, drink, fix herself. Maybe you can get away with that in the southern countries, but it's an irritating thing for a busy person to stand around and watch. My husband built our outbuildings with his own two hands and that includes our Finnish log sauna which just isn't that common around here any longer. He used birches off our land and he hand peeled every log. I went along and am proud of his work, but I told my husband then it was a lot of work for an old custom and did he really need to do this? He said the work was healthy and so was sauna and of all people, I should be glad. I grew up with sauna, right? It was a point between us. We came at health different ways.

But we are busy and careful. We have six months' worth of canned goods because I tend the two gardens, at least when the chiropractor says I can. We are sparing with our well water, and ordinarily we don't sit around visiting. Just the Yalmers and Joftes come for coffee now and then when I bake my deep pan glaze brack.

Anyway, I got out of Miss Barbados' way while she fixed herself for the day. The girl hardly looked at me. Woman to woman, I figured she knew I saw her for the sneak she was, stealing my husband's brother and tearing down his health. Mick sat over at the table demanding his breakfast. (At noon, remember.) She said, honey baby not to worry and got sausages out of the refrigerator. She hardly looked at me but wondered outloud if there was room to bake them in the oven. Yes? she said at the end of her sentences. Yes?

I couldn't believe the girl! Bake sausages with my fruit bread! I told her no and handed her a fry pan off the hook. Who had ever heard of baking breakfast sausages? I could feel the tension all up and down my spine when I turned my back on her and scrubbed my mixing bowl in the sink.

The bread had plenty of time to go yet. I rinsed the bowl and then went out in the back garden, picking some raspberries along the way. I felt tight and was glad for the soothing scent of the wild berries. I sat down on a log and pulled my workpants loose at the knees. It's what you wear, living here. But this Maruca was prancing aound in short shorts and a tiny tee shirt. I'd been slapping mosquitos all morning, but it was as if they kept their distance from her. She didn't say a thing about them, but with my husband gone days, she didn't say much to me at all.

When I came back in they said they wanted the canoe for the afternoon and I said that's fine, wanting just to get them out of my hair—ha.

But then John Yalmers stopped by to return one of my husband's tools. John is a friendly man. He noticed the case of berry wines and made a joke to me about it.

"Well, let's have some," said Mick, eager for someone to join in their drinking since Kev and I didn't. "Try it out. Maruca, pour."

John Yalmers laughed and looked sheepish standing there in his steel toed boots with the steel showing right through where the material had once been. Maruca held a little juice glass toward him. John Yalmers was used to coffee and glaze brack and no foreigners in my kitchen.

"Ya, sure," he said.

I turned away and then long after John Yalmers drank his two glasses of elderberry wine and was on his way, these visitors still sat there drinking, now just talking about canoeing like it was something they'd want to do someday. The kitchen was heating up pretty good. Miraculously, I had gotten onto my sixteenth bread loaf, despite the commotion and without taking my rest. Finally, with me saying how it wasn't going to rain, they reluctantly tied the canoe onto our old pick-up and set out for Toimi Lake down the road.

I got the feeling they would've gone for a movie theater or dance band just as well if they could have found one. They were back in two hours: Maruca, wouldn't you know, had forgotten the sweater I loaned her and she just got too cold on the lake.

I was done with bread for the day and was busy getting Kev's dinner, fixing enough food for them, too. I was calmed now, knowing my husband would be home soon.

But that night by seven o'clock Mick was swaggering and talking even louder than usual. I could feel his voice settling in my neck. He started carrying a little gun around the house. It looked like a silver toy to me, nothing much, but my husband threw a fit at the sight of it.

"Get that thing out of here," he said.

"Come on, what's your gripe?" Mick stood with a beer bottle in one hand and the gun in the other. "Let me show it to you. You've got arms. All you hermit types do."

"Arms? I have a hunting rifle, knife, bow and arrow. Where's your head? People don't look for trouble up here. Hey, the old men here were war protesters. Take that gun outside. I don't need it." My husband stands by the old ways of the North Woods as much as he knows how. It suits him as if he were born here.

Mick laughed at my husband. "Hey, Kev. You don't know what's what any longer, old man. It's city life, modern times. You want to be prepared, be on top of the paranoiacs out there. Hey, kooks like the woods, too. You need a gun."

“This is no city, Mick,” Kev said. “We’re clean up here. No gun’s going to protect you from anything out there.” I nodded fiercely into my husband’s eyes, wanting him to say more on this. It was right of him to set his brother straight. “And neither will a quack.” He turned away from me. I could feel his agitation settling in my throbbing neck, too. I was sorry I had missed my rest.

The brothers grew up on a farm; Kev came north and took over an uncle’s land. That’s how he met me. Mick went to the Cities, to some school, then to teach in the southern countries.

“Trouble,” said my husband. He was standing at the sink, shirtless, sponging off his sweat, brushing his teeth. He turned to his brother and I could see the light pattern of hair on his chest. He kept no shaving equipment and his beard was years old, curly and trimmed.

The hairless brother just stared and worked his thumb over the metal thing in his hand.

“Ah, we’re talking about different things. What the hell.” Mick shrugged and talked out the window at his reflection. “I thought all you guys had gun racks in your trucks, pistols in your pockets. Not this far north, huh?”

My husband lay there agitated, still awake when I went upstairs to bed at my usual eleven o’clock. Our upstairs is just a half attic my husband converted to a bedroom and small storage; you could clearly hear them down there. They were playing another game with words. I heard Mick call it hinkdink. Let’s play hinkdink, he had said.

“A gay magistrate,” was the last thing Maruca was saying as I came up to bed.

“Queer peer!” Mick’s voice carried right up our stairs. They laughed a long time after that one. I lay on my back and massaged my neck with both hands.

I wonder if there are other things that go wrong with a body without hair, I said to Kev in the dark.

Oh, hush it, he told me and I did, but I made a mental note to ask my chiropractor about it.

I’m coming home early tomorrow, my husband told me. He’s my brother, after all. I have to do something with them. We’ll have sauna. He might get some good out of it.

Well, I wouldn’t interfere with family in this situation, but my opinion was that he had done enough already. That first night he fed them a whole sackful of the smelt we caught at the spring run out of Lake Superior and had kept frozen in the cellar. He mixed up blueberry and wild rice pancake batter for them if they’d ever bother to get out the griddle and try some. He never asked when they were leaving. My husband did everything without saying much. He’s a man who never says much; he’s been mistaken for a Finn. His silence and my accent are what people usually hear first from us so they assume things.

I tried not to worry Kev too much about my days with the visitors. I said to Kev that I was getting my fair baking done, all right. I told him I rested on my back one half hour after lunch like the chiropractor said to, and I could feel the relief that gave me. I didn't tell him what happened when John Yalmers was drinking their wine and I excused myself around the brown snip to go for a coffee refill. I didn't tell him she hissed at me, "So boring." And that somehow I was starting to feel clumsy and big in my own kitchen as if I were the one who belonged out of doors after all, instead of her, the wild animal.

Should I lose weight, I asked my husband in the dark.

Lord, he sighed. Don't talk so much. Then he said ask the chiropractor, but what did my ancestors do without a chiropractor? You know, what had everyone always done? Just think on that, he said. I thought: sauna. I heard my husband cough into his pillow and the next sound was a snore. I knew it was hard for him to have company, to have a hairless city brother with a gun and a brown girlfriend underfoot.

My husband and I don't believe in divorce for any reason.

The next day they drove into town. They left after noon and here they were, home for dinner already. I had baked one hundred raspberry jam tarts while they were gone.

"What strange element of the woods will my brother bring forth tonight?" Mick called to the trees as he stepped out of his car. I watched from the kitchen window, wishing they weren't home so soon. She laughed and carried in packages—fruit and more sausages—potato sausages, I judged by their whiteness. He pulled a case of beer from the car trunk.

Kev came home early like he said he would. I made pasties and since they'd never heard of this, they thought it was a treat. She said so to Kev, but not to me. Anyone on the Range would know a pasty. But in Barbados and those places, who knows what they eat? Fruit, I guess. She must have bought the town grocery out of fruit. I set a bowl of it on the table after dinner and they got out cherry wine. They talked about the fruit as they drank, but neither one of them touched it.

My husband told them he was firing up the sauna and they seemed to like the idea, as long as someone else was doing the work, you'd know. They had looked in the sauna house earlier and asked my husband to show them everything about it. They liked the sod covered roof, they said. Well, it's no small task lugging enough water out there and getting the wood heated up. In between trips my husband told them sauna history and stories. He really believes in the healing properties of sauna so he got all excited. Explaining it to people was something he hardly had had the chance to do. He talked much more than usual. He described jumping in the snow on a winter night and the pattern of stars you get here in the January sky. He remembered certain sauna parties when the old men talked about Finland and settled business, naked. He told what Indians say about it. The purification of the

soul through sweating was the main thing, he said. It made you strong. He explained all about that sweating and said you'd feel an improvement in spirit. Really, Mick. On his last trip back outside he mentioned how to wash hair during sauna and said he was ready to begin his bath right now. He'd be out there whenever they came. My husband slammed the screen door behind him so he didn't see his brother's face change expressions.

I was soaking some dried fruit in tea and separating whites and yolks for tomorrow's baking so I was right there. This Mick and Maruca began making faces at each other and whispering. I saw Mick's hand go lightly to his head, then he said, "Give me that black cherry wine, Maruca."

I'm not a good judge of quantities—I use exact spoon and cup measurements in my baking—but I could see that my husband's brother was suddenly drinking down the wine a lot faster than before. And the Barbados one was toying her foot around his leg.

My husband was out there longer than we ever were when the Yalmers or Joftes used to join us for sauna, back when I did it, before my husband agreed that medicine and a doctor's talk were for me. It gets so quiet out here. I guess, I'd laughed, I'd like a medicine that speaks, a real doctor instead of a steam room. Then try it, Kev had said, and that's how I started.

Now I realized these two in the kitchen weren't about to go anywhere. Since I wasn't telling my husband all that they were putting me through by day, I thought I'd just handle this in my own way, too.

"Better get going. Kev is waiting a long time now," I told them.

"Oh, yes?" Maruca said.

"Yes, Mick. Kev is waiting for you," I said.

"Well, I don't know. I'm kind of settled in here. What the hell. Maybe I'll just skip it," he said. I could feel that fake loudness of his voice, but it didn't settle anywhere on me this time. Mick tilted his head back and I could see his neck working to gulp the liquor he was shooting down it. I was using a hand beater on my whites. I tapped it on the mixing bowl.

"Skip it?" I said. "You can't do that. Kev would be so disappointed and mad. It's work to fire up the sauna, or didn't you see all the water he carried out? Didn't you notice? He only did this because you're here. You better go have your sauna now."

I knew I made them uncomfortable and that was fine with me. She kept kicking her feet and he drank faster, faster all the time. Would he remove his wig in the little entry way to the sauna house? What, I wondered, did a man's sex look like without hair all around? Anyone would think of this right off, hearing of the disease, so I didn't feel mean when the thought crossed my mind again now. I had eight whites beaten to froth.

"Why won't you just go now?" I said. "My husband has done all this work and here you sit. Every day you take up this kitchen sitting. Now you have a reason to move. Get out. He's waiting."

For the first time since they'd taken over my kitchen they sat without speaking. Then Maruca turned on me.

"You know why we will not go." She looked different. She was hunched, cornered, and in captivity she became a little monkey here in the land of deer and wolves. "You know all about Mickey's situation. Yes, you do. You know his problem. He has no hair." She said it in a screechy whisper. But in her accent it sounded like hall. He has no hall. "Why would he go in there with people, with you!"

Mick's head sagged to his chest and his eyes were shut tightly. It might have been a city form of crying.

"I don't plan a sauna for myself," I said, grinding the beater against porcelain.

"Well, do something," Maruca pleaded. "How could your husband forget all this? Such ignorance! See how Mickey suffers."

"My husband got very excited about sauna so he forgot. What does he care about hair? My husband thinks of larger things. And if Mick's hair problem is someone's fault, it's not his." I liked the way she flinched. "I'll do something," I said coolly. "I'll tell my husband that you two want to sauna alone. Don't worry. He'll leave you alone if that's what you want. But you have to take your sauna."

I wiped my hands on the sink towel and saw myself in the medicine chest mirror: wisps of hair falling out of pins, flushed, jowly face.

"He probably didn't expect you to understand the tradition anyway." I walked out feeling the rustle of stiff work pants against my thighs and it felt good.

"Oh," I heard her lisp behind me. "Honey, what a mean place after all."

In the dark I followed the path to our sauna house. "A mean place." The words stung even though I knew she was wrong, sly, and out of place. All that we had done for them. . . . The raspberries smelled stronger by night and I tried to breathe evenly to stop a sudden quivering.

Out in the trees I could see the sauna lit up against the dark and I could imagine my husband soaking in his sweat, meditating within. What did he think about? Suddenly I felt so afraid of him, afraid to walk through the door to him and his thoughts. He had never liked me talking during sauna. He liked to be alone in there; he wouldn't really care about his brother and the girlfriend.

But I wanted to know what they had said. I wanted to ask him, how could she call us mean? I wanted to get him out. My husband would be ready to come out now. I wanted to make him promise he would never go out to the sauna again. Maybe the sauna was like a chiropractor visit for him, but I just never believed sweating could do all that much for you. You need pressure applied, muscle worked over for results.

My husband would come out and let those two take a turn. All I had to do was tell him to. It wouldn't be such a great thing for them like it was for

the old Finns and Indians, but I wished I could spy on them, see those two steaming up in there. I knew they'd ruin sauna tradition in all ways possible. I was anxious to hear what my chiropractor would say about my husband's brother's problem. I wondered if this Mick would lay his wig with his clothes in the little entry way and what she really thought about when she saw him without it on his head. But these thoughts weren't so important. Really, I had to talk to my husband. Trembling, I opened the door. I felt tears, not steam in my eyes.

"Kev," I whispered. He sat crosslegged on a bench, head thrown back. "Kev, am I really mean?" I said. I knew she was wrong, but her words hurt anyway. Here was my husband, though, a stranger in the woods so white and stiff and distant in clouds of steam. It looked like something supernatural in there, all right, but not like fun magic. It looked like my husband could disappear forever if I didn't get him out right away. "Am I, Kev? She says I am."

He didn't open his eyes.

"Leave," he said. "Leave me alone in this one place, will you now?"