

THE DECLINE OF MRS. ABINGDON

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Mrs. Abingdon, a wealthy woman of indeterminate age, sits in her garden chair of white wicker. There is a side table with a medium-sized box.

It is never too soon to begin ones memoirs. When you get to a certain age — and I'm far too vain to divulge my own, things formerly remembered with clarity and in detail have become suffused with the hazy luminosity of a late summer afternoon. Faces seem to shimmer and lose definition. All the rooms one has lived in blur together until one forgets what argument or embrace happened where. Moments blend like mountain streams coalescing to form rivers.

Not that my faculties are impaired. They are not. No indeed. I mean to say memory does not always serve. Wherever possible one should take down notes, save documents, photographs, anything at all.

For years I would record happenings on the backs of envelopes and scrap paper. Later I used notebooks, which I kept locked away. The other night I began rummaging through boxes of papers. My personal attendant Marjorie found me asleep in my reading chair with pages scattered all around me, just like the Sibyl in her cave. We sorted through most everything.

Marjorie has arranged for her young cousin Philip to come around and help me assemble my notes for the final work. I do hope he is as handsome and witty as she describes him. Perhaps someone will be interested in my little revelations. I don't know. The important thing is to get it done and enjoy doing it.

When I came upon this box I asked Marjorie to leave the room.

What might be in there? she asked.

Things, Marjorie, I replied. *Things I've kept to remind me of times I can never forget.*

At that Marjorie left in a cloud of bewilderment. I decided to repair to the garden for better light. There's just so little sunshine in New England. I have to store up some warmth for the winter.

Not many generations before I was born the women in this region would collect their tears in little glass phials. They actually saved the tears brought on by

significant occasions and occurrences — the marriage of a daughter, the death of a husband. Today people found doing this might be given behavior modification treatments. I, however, understand the impulse completely. For it is not sensation one recalls but emotion. A rose pressed in a book looks like, well, like a flattened-out dead rose. But each petal of each flower I pressed myself represented some girlhood wish I've long forgotten. What I cannot forget is the flowering of dreams of love. If our lives are measured by what we leave behind, then most of me is in this box. Who, upon examination, would see anything besides crumpled blossoms and scraps of paper? No, it is never too soon to begin ones memoirs, especially when has achieved any sort of notoriety upon which one might capitalize.

(Unfolds invitation.) *Mrs. Arthur Brown request your presence at the marriage of her daughter, Sylvia Constance Brown to Herbert Reginald Abingdon, Jr.* Father had died of a liver ailment several years before. If my friends at the public school had known about the home I had to return to every night — but I mustn't dwell.

It was one May afternoon. I was typing someone's will in a dark law office that dealt chiefly with taxes and estates. A man with a soft light in his eyes walked in. He said: *You're far too young and beautiful to be chiseling headstones in this graveyard.* At once I thought to myself: *This is the man I am going to marry.*

His mother despised me. When I visited, she always referred to me in the third person, even when her son had left the room: *Sylvia's perfume is a trifle overpowering for me*, she would remark to the potted fern. *It was a gift from*

Herbert, I would retort. Then she would proclaim to the lampshade: *Yes, what a lovely, delicate scent.* The old fake. She pretended her husband had left her a fortune. If he had, there was nothing left of it; but the name carried a fair amount of weight, as did she. She'd hoped to marry Herbert off to some real fortune. Yet marry him I did. Grace Abingdon refused to attend the wedding. What was I to her but some pathetic working woman? Actually, I wonder why Herbert didn't see me in the same way. Of course I did help him start his business. Then there was the house to attend to, all the social events and of course the children. I suppose I could say that largely through my efforts Herbert became a self-made man.

To this day I remain Mrs. Sylvia Abingdon. Yes, I retain the Mrs. and fear I will never graduate to Ms. I do not mind the concept of Ms. — I just don't like the sound of it. Ms., mizz, mizzzz — it sounds like a bee buzzing.

For my time and in my county I was considered a very wealthy woman. My husband used his charm and good name to get backing for his business. He built a large factory in our modest New England town. The factory produced fasteners of every description and for any function imaginable. From construction girders to brassiere straps, if something in America needed to be attached to something else, Herbert was the man who made the thing that did the job.

The first thing off the line was a zipper bearing the inscription in very small print: Fascination Fastener Company. I hated the company name, but it did stick in the

mind. At my first pull that zipper became permanently stuck. Who says they don't make things like they used to?

For Herbert fasteners were more than a business. They were a vocation. Still, most people thought them exceedingly trivial. You could see it in their faces. When he got to talking shop, people would do anything to change the subject. *Sylvia*, Herbert would often inquire of me. *Do you realize that almost everything produced in the modern world is held together by fasteners? And that without them, our entire civilization might literally fall apart? Can you imagine a world totally devoid of fasteners?*

Why, Herbert, I shudder to think, would be my frequent reply; but my mind would wander at such moments. I would behold a vision of such a world in which sheets on clotheslines blew away with the wind, billowing like clouds as wooden clothespins fell to the ground in useless halves - Herbert made the metal clips; dogs bounded happily away as startled owners held dangling leashes minus the little clasps on the ends; men looked down startled as their belts unbuckled, their hooks unhooked and the zippers on their trousers slowly unzipped. Yes, I could see it all and it was beautiful. Civilization is overrated anyway. We got along for a hundred thousand years without it, and look at the mess we've made through progress. But the fasteners made us rich and the money held the two of us together. Perhaps if Herbert had failed we would have remembered how much we'd loved each other at the beginning - but that is idle speculation.

I made it a practice never to discuss Herbert's business. Good wives were not supposed to concern themselves with such things. Not in those days, and not in Bannister, Massachusetts. *Manage the house, and don't ask questions!* was my motto. And what a house it was! It still is, although, like dried flowers, its splendor has faded somewhat. At the very top of the hill, commanding all, it was the largest of all the houses in town. The real estate listing promised *Six bedrooms, three fireplaces, spectacular views*. The ad left out drafty and haunted. I hear they sue for that sort of thing nowadays - and win! And so I was installed in an ornate Victorian manor — a modern architect's nightmare of turrets and gables and secret passageways. The right amount of charm and mystery — even the requisite odd noises in the night to make you certain that former occupants might still be knocking around without paying rent. I believe they're still here. Last month a woman came to the door with a bag of crystals, offering to cleanse the house of spirits. I told her to go away because I needed the company. She protested that they were trapped, desperate souls. I told her that that was precisely why we understood one another. Whenever I think they're getting a bit out of control I vacuum. I don't know about nature, but ghosts abhor it.

I always kept the house full of flowers from the garden in Summer, and from the shops in Winter. In our young married days we entertained on Thursday evenings. All the local gentry would arrive for pleasant, predictable conversation and a free meal. In July and August we'd give parties at the lakefront cottage. *You are cordially invited to a Summer soiree...* and all that. No one of note dared to miss our soirees. Politicians, industrialists and bankers all lined up. Cigars were smoked

and deals were made. The venues may change, the cigars may mold in their wrappers, but that is how things are done in this world. And woe to the lowly and uninvited!

Herbert's empire grew and would not be undone. It was grand to be a rich woman in a small town. Why live in a city where millionaires are a dime a dozen? Dear Bannister — far enough west of Boston to make us that important. When we sneezed, the doctor was called. When we went to church - each and every Sunday without fail - the faithful prayed for our continued health and their continued jobs. Yet I was never a deeply religious woman, and God and I have not exactly been on speaking terms since the death of my husband.

I would like to say that hard work was the cause of his demise, but it was not. He did work hard, harder than most do these days. He worked at least twelve hours each day and in summer always stopped for an ice cream at the town drug store on his way home. He was a creature of habit. I saw my husband very little during the first twenty years of marriage, and almost never in the last five. How I managed to have children remains a mystery to me. Yet I raised them from infancy and through early childhood until the necessity of a good private education tore them from my breast.

Fifteen years into the marriage I was left with an empty house and the thought: This is not how it is supposed to be. Will I ever know my own children? Will my daughter show respect for me out of deep and abiding love, or out of the fear that I

might cut off her charge cards? It's so hard to know whether children love you as much as you want them to. The only way of knowing how much power we wield over their tender souls is by seeing the amount of fear we can inspire in them. And if the money was my means of daring her to defy me, then at worst I'm only human. No more. I just couldn't see Ellen marrying that fellow with the rock and roll band. And running off to California with him to take God knows what drugs — that had to be stopped at all costs. Do you believe I had to hire a private investigator to find her? I returned her to college. There she met the right sort of man, married him, bore two glorious children, and promptly got divorced. I have only to look into the eyes of my grandchildren when they visit each Christmas and Fourth of July to know that I have done right. I have even established a trust to take care of their continued psychotherapy, should anything happen to me.

My son Arthur is all right. His family lives not too far away. Of course, I don't see them as much as I would like. His wife is a the new professional woman to whom they've devoted countless magazines. Susan is cordial but, when she looks at me, it seems she's examining me like some glassed-in museum exhibit. I want to break through that glass with my fist and scream: *Don't you understand? Things for me were not what they are for you!* I could not go to college. Could not become a lawyer or some glamorized banker. These were not options open to me. And I want to tell her that she sees her daughters about as much as fathers did before wives went to work. They're paying other people to raise them. Illegal aliens, of course, which cuts *them* out of public office. They think that they can spend what they call *quality time* with them. I have news for them. Time is time and there's

precious little of it! But I hold my tongue. I suppose it may be better to eliminate parents from the job of parenting. Have computers and robots raise entirely programmed children.

When our own children had gone, Herbert drew more and more into himself. *Let other people give the parties now*, he would say. *I have a factory to run.* The coldness of a New England man grows with each passing winter, as if some frozen part of his soul never melts with Spring thaw. Before you know it the ice has assumed glacial proportions, sweeping away all in its path. So it was with Herbert Abingdon. Our marriage entered an Ice Age. We took separate bedrooms. I thought of having the walls done in cave paintings of water buffalo. My well-being interested him less and less. Divorce was out of the question. I knew I could not adapt to life with less material comfort. I had worked hard to achieve it and I was determined to hold on to it.

I was in the drugstore that drizzly morning picking out Herbert's birthday card. None of the cards were quite right. Then again, for fifty cents what can one expect to purchase but cheap sentiment? I heard woman behind the counter talking in that low tone of voice one can't help but overhear. She was saying: *See that woman over there?* She was wearing a blue service jacket and bifocals with a chain. I kept browsing.

That one? the other asked.

No, the other one. The woman who always acts like nothing in the store is good enough for her. You know who Herbert Abingdon is?

The one who makes the staples?

That's his wife. She don't know it yet, but he's been keeping Lizzie Reynolds.

I swallowed hard and pretended I had heard nothing.

Liz Reynolds? You mean the girl who had my job before me?

Two years now. And she thinks she knows everything. The older woman laughed. So stick around. You never know where you might go from the soda fountain.

I grabbed the only card that did not have hearts all over it, plunked down the exact change and marched out of the store, tears streaking my face.

I never confronted him. I never got up the courage. Herbert had become a stranger, but a familiar one. He died in her arms several months later. The death certificate said heart failure, although not in so few words. I can only think it came on in the throes of misspent passion - the kind of passion Herbert had rarely shown me. The social elite of the town stopped by with their offerings of sympathy, but I could see the derisive smiles playing at the corners of their lips. Invitations stopped coming. Herbert had abandoned me in love and in life. I was left the scorned, dishonored

widow who must at all cost honor her husband's memory. What is it about wealthy older men? Do they flatter themselves that younger women are mesmerized by their animal magnetism? Why do they turn away from the women who have stood by them? Perhaps they don't want to be reminded that they might not have become successful without us. Perhaps they feel they've waged their wars and having won deserve their spoils. I vowed that no man would have that much power over my life again.

Under Herbert's will I retained everything, even the deed to that shabby little house he'd bought for Miss Reynolds and their trysts - with one proviso: that she be allowed to live in it until she died. And although Elizabeth Reynolds may be fifteen years my junior, I am determined to outlive her. I can swear to this. The day after she's buried in her miserable grave, I intend to stand and watch as that horrible place is burned to the ground.

I was alone now, shut away in mourning and unspeakable anger. I saw to business and sold off the company. I wept for myself, not for him and, unlike my ancestors, I preferred to wash my eyes of tears.

It was my dearest friend Kate who changed my life. Her husband owned the local electric company. She arrived one Friday morning and said: *Sylvia, pack a bag. We're driving to Boston for the weekend.*

I protested: *What will we do in Boston? Paddle around in the swan boats?* It seemed a very run-down city at the time.

When in doubt, I always shop, Kate said, and we drove off.

Kate confided a secret to me on the road. Alas, into her bedroom as well, the Yeti of impotence had stealthily crept. *Sylvia, she said to me one day. Jack's as limp as last week's lettuce. I don't know what to do. I stuffed him full with health foods. Why, I've put enough bee pollen on his corn flakes to straighten the Tower of Pisa. I've read so many sex manuals I'm ready to take up car engine repair next. Jack may own a power company, but there's no juice left down at the substation. The only thing the man can do with balls is golf.*

Kate had a frank way of speaking.

What do you suggest we do, Kate, take on lovers?

Sylvia, you're a free woman now, and I might as well be, she said.

We took a hotel suite for the weekend and drowned our sorrows in little luxuries. We were sitting at a restaurant Saturday evening when my eye was caught by the glance of a young man seated alone at the next table. Kate followed my gaze. He was darkly handsome with piercing blue eyes. *Excuse me,* he said. *But you two ladies seemed so, how shall I say, isolated. Where can your husbands be to leave you lovely women unescorted.* His accent proved to be native Italian and his name

Carlo. He asked to join us for coffee. We complied. After listening to his tales of exotic places we excused ourselves to the ladies. *Sylvia, I think we've hit pay dirt,* Kate said.

Kate, I admonished. I think it's he who wants us to do the paying.

Then why not? He wants what we've got and we want what he's got. Fair's fair.

Then you can have him, I told her.

To which she said: *Not on your life. You saw him first and you get him first. Friends share.*

I began to laugh. That night Kate went alone to a movie, a double feature, and Carlo escorted me back to the hotel. He had a smoldering sort of sensuality that blazed forth at the slightest breeze. We had blissful, ecstatic moments such as I had never experienced with Herbert. The experience was like tasting fine wine after having had nothing to drink all your life but grape juice. Having drunk the first glass I wanted another and, dripping with the sweat of spent passion, Carlo was eager to oblige. Kate was not the only one treated to a double feature that night.

When she returned we had properly showered and were sipping aperitifs brought by room service. *Two fine and lovely ladies,* Carlo pronounced and further

arrangements were made. He presented his card to us and left. The card stated his business as Consultant on International Affairs. How accurate.

Sylvia, Kate said. We can't go on meeting men like Carlo in hotel rooms. Sooner or later we're going to run into someone we know and that will be the end of us.

I'm sorry, Kate, but I can't let this opportunity slip by.

What does that mean? she asked.

I'm inviting Carlo to stay with me. She protested, but I held fast. I'd seen him. I'd claimed him. He was all mine. Carlo drove me back home to Bannister and took up residence.

It was then that I learned just how wicked a small town could be. You see, Carlo's living with me occasioned great scandal. Former friends avoided me completely. In town, they spoke to me curtly and briefly. I thought I knew what I was doing. If my husband could take on a mistress, why couldn't I keep a lover? I was that naive. I began to get anonymous letters. One said: *Get out of town, you whore on the hill.* I giggled at the time. Then came the phone calls. One morning I opened the door to pick up the newspaper, when I discovered a truckload of manure had been dumped on my front lawn. I had to pay someone else to cart it away.

I was alone the night it happened. Carlo had driven down to the package store for some supplies. A call came. He was in the hospital. A gang of four youths had beaten him with a fists, boots and a baseball bat. Two ribs were fractured, his face bruised and bloodied. I took him home. In a little while he recovered. When he finally left the house, it was for good.

I was furious. What had I done that Herbert hadn't? I had not thrown myself on the casket to be buried alive with him. Herbert had died and I had decided to live. That was my crime. I became more determined than ever to hold my ground, to hold my head high in provincial old Bannister. Nothing would stop me. Not threats, not ostracism, not violence. Say what you will about the beauty of New England. In Massachusetts I know the times may have changed, and the proceedings may now be conducted in whispers, but our witch trials still go on.

I had no friends left but Kate and nothing much to do in the old house. I went back to staring out at the valley. I had the same commanding view and no real command at all. The baton had been passed to a newer, showier generation. Perhaps I should say the baton had been dropped. Nothing seemed the same at all. Not the music, not the people. Even old Bannister was being crowded out by the influx of dreaded outsiders.

Some of the hippies who fled the cities in the Sixties lived on nearby farms, following their romantic dreams. Now I know real farmers, and they're the most pragmatic, no-nonsense people your likely to meet, with very little time for dreams,

let alone sleep. Guess what happened to these refugees? They got bored! They wanted movies, so they opened movie houses. They didn't like our food, so they opened trendy restaurants. They started computer companies because they had nothing to do all Winter - all this generally with their parents' money. They had brought the city to me, and I wasn't sure if I wanted it. More people followed. Ski resorts sprang up on the mountains. Nouveau riche Italians bought country houses. Yuppies came along in the early Eighties to do whatever it was they did that made them seem so nervous and self-important. I became surrounded by the entire capuccino generation. Something about it all began to interest me. I had been brought up to distrust outsiders; but upon looking around I knew it was time to investigate the new, or wither up and become the town recluse. Frankly, it's a lot of work being a true eccentric, and I didn't feel up to the job.

I began to do all those things I'd kept myself from. I traveled. I attended lectures and evening seminars at neighboring institutions of higher learning. I discovered a bit of high culture in the mountains: summer theaters, outdoor orchestral concerts, that sort of thing. Sometimes Kate would go with me, but more and more I wanted to be on my own. To be among new people.

I was at one of those concerts, seated on a blanket on the lawn. The sky was overcast, but the air and the ground were warm. I noticed a man in a group next to me. He had a well-groomed gray beard covering a warm smile. He winked. I winked back. He offered me a glass of wine. I accepted the plastic cup gratefully and we began to talk. His name was Alexander Jay, and I discovered that he was a

poet who wrote and taught at the university. That evening he broke from his group at my insistence. We went to dinner, and since he'd been given a ride to the concert, I had no choice but to drive him home. He lived in a little cabin in the woods beside a pond. The walls were jammed with books and you had to climb a ladder to get to the bed. This was something to which, after a time, I grew accustomed.

Alexander introduced me to a new class of people - artists, musicians, actors. He knew everyone. Photographers photographed me. They said my face had character. Someone gave me a small part in an independent movie. My world expanded. My love for Alexander deepened. Our affair has been going on for six years. I refuse to discuss marriage. At least I would, if he ever brought up the subject. He is known as something of a decadent poet. He wrote a book of explicit erotic poetry and was consequently cut off by the National Endowment for the Arts. Personally, I've never had any quarrel with his endowments. Alexander dedicated the book: For Sylvia, who taught me what it is to be a man. Can you imagine? To me. He titled it "Lays for a Lowly Lady." It won a number of awards.

A certain conservative Southern Senator read excerpts aloud during the proceedings and railed against public money being spent to fund such trash. I watched it all live on C-SPAN 2. The media picked it up. Soon no bookstore could keep it in stock. I'm rather proud of the controversy. It's not every woman who's had her vagina denounced on the senate floor. I'm sure the book gave the senator an erection, although the image sends chills through me.

One morning an interviewer from New Woman Magazine showed up at my door. The article: Fabulous and Fifty-something, started a wave of public interest. I was asked to appear on the Sally Jesse show with Alexander. Offers to lecture arrived, so I did. The money was too good to pass up. Now the townswomen stare at me in astonishment. They even started speaking to me. Television has a way of legitimizing any sort of indiscretion.

These days I welcome any sort of difference into the community. These old towns may need some shock tactics to start moving into the twenty-first century. Recently, every August hordes of lesbians have started descending on us for a women's music festival. At first I thought it was no concern of mine if they want spell women with two y's. It's just that I had to hear about it in the market from all the scandalized matrons of the church. These women get all dressed up every morning just to walk to the post office or the grocery store. On that first day of the event they got together and compared outrages. It was like a convention of bird watchers in the town square. Mavis Stone saw two women riding on a motorcycle together. What's more they had no shirts on underneath their open leather jackets, so that as they rode their breasts flew about in the breeze. After that, Evelyn Idlenot surprised one with her bluejeans down urinating behind the town hall. And when Althea Strange went to place flowers on the grave of her great grandfather, the Reverend Hezekiah Strange, she witnessed an act of lesbian fornication in the bushes of the old cemetery, breasts out, jeans down and all! The poor dear swallowed her chewing gum.

I have sometimes regarded men as necessary indulgences, but I have never desired women sexually. Still, I decided to investigate these shameless women, since we had at least that in common. I procured a flyer for the event. It proclaimed WYMYNS MUSIC FESTIVAL. Featuring: The Sapphotones, The Butch Fatales (I've heard them, they're rather good), Heather Duster, Naomi Moongoddess, and many more! Come early, come often! Stop the patriarchy, smash Maybelline, bare your breasts! Free childcare and tempeh burgers provided. I was intrigued.

I went into the Soy and Song Cafe. A table of four women about my age were next to me. By now I'd grown skilled at insinuating myself into nearby conversations. I told them about myself, excused myself for my curiosity, and wished them a good time at the concert. They wouldn't hear of it and dragged me along. I can't say I was as swept up in the spirit of the whole thing as they were, but I enjoyed it. I invited my new acquaintances to my home for dinner. They came and by the next day I had about five tents pitched in my back garden.

This fact did not go unnoticed. A week later a letter to the editor appeared in the local paper. It read, in part: People who welcome into our town the enemies of God's laws are evil sinners themselves and deserve no respect from anyone. I don't care what they think their money entitles them to. They can't buy their way out of wickedness. (It gives a New Testament reference here.) We don't ride people out of town on rails anymore, but if we could we would. The only thing we can do is turn our backs and hope our prayers chase out the devil's workers among us.

So I wrote back: I have no wish to associate with bigots. The only sins I see in this matter are ignorance and blind hatred. Those who go around blithely condemning their fellow human beings to the fires of Hell had better have themselves fitted for suits of asbestos.

The thing of it is I don't really understand why women should have to depend on men for their emotional fulfillment, even most of us who sleep with them. Women spend far too much time trying to figure men out. They seem rather obvious to me. They remain little boys throughout their lives, always having to prove their masculinity. What's there to prove? Masculinity comes along with having a Y chromosome. You don't see women out declaring wars to prove their femininity. Men build their empires. They construct their blatant phallic symbols as if to prove they all have permanent erections. I have something to tell them, the penis is a rather weak organ over which men can exert but little control. It rises of its own accord, or equally fails to do so against all entreaty. I think that sex is an art, not just a matter of poking. There is communication going on, intuition, emotion. We've been concerned with stamping that all out - reducing it to books on what goes where and how to achieve perfect orgasm. We've turned sex from play into work. And guess which partner has to do most of the work! Lovemaking becomes a ritual that's lost its meaning. When men think they are failing to get the response they're told to want, they hide themselves in their work, or sports or other pastimes, leaving the women to sulk or quit them. Reduced to this level, the deeper connection

between people is lost. Marriages break up. People forget why they're on the planet to begin with.

Yes, I have my Alexander, but he is the rare exception. With him I can relax. We can talk, make dinner, drink wine, dance. We don't worry that much about intimacy, it's just one of the things we create together when we feel like it. After all this time, I've finally found love. The right kind of love. That's all that matters to us. We keep the affair interesting because we keep ourselves interesting and interested in the world around us.

I rattle around the old house, running afoul of Marjorie, who's always telling me not to eat the food I've enjoyed all my life. She won't let me do housework. So I spend winters in the living room and summers out of doors as much as possible.

At this point either a wind comes up, or she upsets the box, spilling its contents.

Now I could use Marjorie's cousin to come and help me.

Starts to gather the pieces.

Just scraps and tatters, but perhaps they can be woven into something greater.

Reaches into a large pocket and takes out a walkie-talkie.

Marjorie, if you are within range of my voice, would you ask them to serve our lunch here in the garden? And remind them to set a place for your young cousin, Philip. And please alert me the moment he arrives.