

Full Length Narrative: The Tea Party

Approx. 3800 words

The florist asked in a whisper if she was bringing the bouquet to the cemetery. Martha answered, "No." *Of course not*, she thought to herself. Harold hated pink. Martha delicately carried a small pink vase, brimming with soft-hued roses, white daisies, and baby's breath, from the flower shop to the car. They were beautiful. It was going to be such a lovely party for her girls. Her babies. The morning was slipping away- already 10:30, and Martha still needed to stop by the bakery on her way home.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mullins," the shop keep called from behind the counter, a colorful, cheery display of macarons, mini fruit tarts, and eclairs. "I have your lady fingers and shortbread cookies ready to go." She placed a pink box, tied with a sheer white ribbon into a perfect bow, on the counter by the register. The bakery sat between a long-closed record shop and the florist on Main Street in Oakmont, an agreeable, movie set-quiet town.

"These will be wonderful for the tea party," Martha said, reaching into her purse. The flowers and treats were a luxury, but Martha stashed a few dollars away each week in her panty drawer to pay for today. The Lunch Bunch, friends since PTA days, surely wouldn't miss her each Wednesday, and, besides, she could make the same sandwich at home. Harold's pension was better spent here.

"A tea party! How fun!" The shop keep rang up the sale. "Is your daughter in town? These days, we only see her when she picks up your Christmas stollen."

"No! They're from someone else," Martha snapped. She hadn't meant to sound angry, but the old woman accidentally shared too much. The shop keep looked up from the register and arched her

eyebrows; her lips scrolled downward like the croissants in the case below as Martha unrolled one-dollar bills from a silk sock in her purse.

Martha shut her eyes for a moment, her forgiveness offering. "Mandy won't be home until the holidays." She reached for the box. "Until then," Martha shrugged and inhaled, "it's just me."

"Ah, well. Good to see you again, Mrs. Mullins. Take care, now." The cash register rang as it closed. "See you at Christmas."

Martha flicked a goodbye wave as she turned towards the door. She told herself she didn't have time to explain who the cookies were for, who the girls were. Not that it mattered. It was nobody's business. With a single determined nod to herself, she walked back to the car, if she could only remember where she parked the damn thing. Her eyes darted up and down Main Street, keys clenched, praying to Anthony, patron saint of lost items. These days, she prayed more to him than Mary.

Martha should not have needed to buy flowers. She used to have such a beautiful home garden, blooming each summer with Duchers, Pink Nitty Gritty, and Sprit of Freedom, her favorite varieties. "A rose for a rose," Harold would always say with a cheek peck, handing her a hand-pruned bouquet each time he came back through the kitchen from their plot on the sunny side of the house.

Martha meant to replant the garden, acquiescing when her daughter chided her for allowing weeds to take over. But she never expected Amanda to pay a landscaper to pull the rosebushes Harold planted before her daughter was even born. "It's not Astroturf, Mom. It's artificial grass. And it will help with the upkeep." Mandy gave her mom a side hug, the kind teachers bestow young children. "One less thing to remember."

"It looks like a putt-putt course, Mandy." Martha had never asked her daughter for help. Never asked anyone. The widow grimaced when the landscaper left and each time she came up her front steps. Nevertheless, today's roses were storebought. No Spirit of Freedom in sight.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Martha said, fiddling with the door key. A six pack of Ensure protein shakes sat on the porch. "Stop asking Bill to deliver the damn drinks, Mandy," she muttered to herself, sidestepping them as she entered the house. "Doesn't she know they taste like talcum powder," she said to nobody. Thinking of talcum powder reminded Martha of drawing with sidewalk chalk on that same front porch a lifetime ago. In pasty, muted pastels, she and Mandy would outline butterflies, practice cursive, and play hopscotch on the cement. The memory made Martha miss the sound of laughter.

Martha went to the dining room to make sure everything was ready, taking her time to check and recheck every detail. She also rechecked the chain lock on the front door, not wanting her daughter to surprise her with a pop-in visit, not recalling, for just a moment, that Mandy moved too far away for unannounced visits quite some time ago. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry, as Harold used to say. Martha ran her fingers down the length of the table, set with a yellowed lace tablecloth she received as a wedding gift almost half a century ago. Six settings were arranged with teacup, saucer, and dessert plate, all crafted of matching bone porcelain China in a rose pattern with gold luster trim. A two-tiered, pink depression glass pastry plate-ready for the cookies- took center stage, with a crystal bowl full of Jordan almonds next to it. The almonds were Brenda's favorite. Martha, in a panic, worried she had forgotten the cookies and rushed back to the kitchen to make sure, making a sign of the cross when she saw the pink box on the counter. She returned to the living room and saw the Jordan almonds. The almonds were Brenda's favorite.

Matching red vinyl booster seats waited in four chairs. The sixth chair, Harold's, remained empty- a framed grainy black and white portrait sat atop his place setting. He would have just loved the festivity of the afternoon. Martha, too, was pleased to host a party. It had been ages.

Martha tiptoed into the guest room, where, on one of the twin beds with identical mint green fitted quilts-- a color that ran throughout the house-- four porcelain dolls laid. They were lined up like matchsticks, asleep in identical pink pajama dresses. The room, made pungent by camphor and mothballs, felt lonely and cold in the way that historical museums do, with furniture and belongings that are decorated and dusted often but never used. After so long, however, the solitude was a comfort to Martha. It's not that Martha didn't see people. She made a point to watch for the mail carrier every afternoon, sitting in the easy chair by the window until he passed, ready to receive his friendly wave. Lawrence always asked if she was getting on alright and let her know each time she left her car door open. "Martha, what am I going to do with you? Lawrence would tsk, wagging his finger as he returned her key ring before handing her the mail. His wink told Martha that he wouldn't report the infraction to her daughter. Last week, she nearly slipped and told him about the tea party.

Martha sang a little wake up song as she pulled open the guest room drapes, the same song she sang to Amanda, her Mandy, so many years ago. Sometimes Martha had trouble keeping the girls apart, the memories of Amanda feeling further away. In a blink or two, her only daughter was grown and gone. "Mandy is just too busy to call home much, and I don't blame her," Martha explained to The Lunch Bunch one afternoon. Her friends nodded in commiseration as they sipped on the soup du'jour, knowing all too well that one of the heartbreaks of motherhood was a vacancy in the heart with nobody left at home to love.

"Could be worse," her friend, Connie offered. "Jake's moving to Japan." Connie handed Martha half her dinner roll as a conciliation.

Martha's recollections of Mandy, however, felt more and more like make-believe as time strode forward; if it weren't for all the photographs Harold took, Martha wondered what she would remember at all. These babies, on the other hand, gently waking from their morning nap by Martha's tender touch, would never ever leave her. "Rise and shine, my darlings," Martha cooed, pinching each one on their inflexible noses, then cradling their porcelain heads, taking her time to change each one into the party dresses laid out on the opposite twin bed. As Martha carefully tugged nightgowns off their small cloth frames, their plastic eyelids clicked up and down, like a ticking clock. "Open. Shut. Open. Shut," Martha would chirp as they mechanically blinked. She took care with each one, caressing their irresistible painted cheeks as she exclaimed, "you will all look so darling today!" Martha picked up and spun the doll closest to her. When the girls awoke from their naps, the house felt alive again.

Martha loved each of the dolls: Libby, the redhead with the yellow bow, Hannah, with her long, blonde ringlets, and Sweet Caroline, the baby with a wisp of hair pulled together in a small barrette. The most special, however, was the birthday girl, Brenda, who wore her hair in brunette bob, with bangs nearly reaching her eyebrows, just like her Mandy used to do.

Martha held up two party dresses to Brenda's limp frame. "Tell Mommy, do you want to wear the pink lace or the blue checks to your party today?" She leaned into the doll's face, putting her ear up to its sterile, rose-colored lips. "Oh, the pink!" Martha leaned in and gave a quick kiss to the doll's cold forehead. "Mommy knew that's what you would pick!" The old woman tickled the tummies of the other dolls, not wanting to play favorites.

Martha herself looked like a doll playing dress up, diminutive in the pleated blue polka dot dress she had stored away for three decades. Something that once fit so smartly now clung to her, as if her aged frame were a bent wire hanger no longer able to support the dress's weight. Martha didn't notice. "I haven't worn this since Mandy's Confirmation," she said aloud as she removed the dress from

the storage container, holding it into the light. She hadn't much need to dress up after the Confirmation. Amanda left for St. Mary's Teaching College two summers later, and she lost Harold to a heart attack the year after that—nothing left to celebrate, she decided. The dress was in fine shape, outside of some brown weathering from age. Martha looked down at her own wilted hands, comparing them to the old dress, tickled at the similarity. She made a mental note to start planning the girls' First Communion, but first, today's party.

Martha straightened out her dress one last time before turning back to the twin bed. She collected Libby, the oldest girl first, and brought them out, one by one, in order of age, to the set table. "Now, I know you girls must be very excited for Brenda's birthday, but let's remember our best manners at the tea party today, especially you, Hannah." She held a stare with the blonde-haired doll—the troublemaker of the group. Hanna's beady eyes stared vacantly ahead. Soon, Brenda was positioned at her seat of honor in the booster chair at the head of the table, next to Harold, in a perfect 90-degree angle, her body bent into the unnatural shape of an upper-case L.

Martha turned to the gramophone, the teak Philips model Harold purchased as a surprise following his first promotion, and began to play Brenda's favorite Doris Day record. Martha admired the album jacket, seeming to recall the same record also being Amanda's favorite before her daughter's tastes turned to rock and roll. A note Harold had written on the album receipt fell from the sleeve. "With you, it's always Tea Time, babe." Harold, of course, was gone. And the record shop, long gone, too. Martha felt a chill at the reminder that she was all that remained of her old life. She bent down to collect and return the receipt before placing the needle on the record.

"With tea for two, and two for tea," Martha sang along, giggling, as she poured Darjeeling into each porcelain cup. She took a sip and waited a moment for the girls to do the same. "Would anyone like a cookie?" The hostess of the house took the cookie plate and placed a lady finger and shortbread in

front of each doll's place. "Ah, ah, ah, Libby. Only two cookies." Martha pulled the plate back.

"Remember what I taught you about a moment on the lips?" Then she placed cookies out for Harold.

"Now, the lights, Maestro," she said as she flipped the switch. Harold always used to say that.

Though still the early afternoon, the room was kept dark by pinch-pleated drapes, drawn together. There was enough light for Martha to find the Eastman Kodak carousel projector set up on the buffet behind the table. Martha had scolded Harold for spending so much money on the extravagance, not to mention the arm and leg to convert film into slides, but now, she felt very glad to have it. Boxes of photo slides, labeled with milestone events, like, "Beach Day 1955," "Yellowstone 1957," and "15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," filled the cabinet under the staircase, where the old card table was also stored.

With a flip of the switch, the projector's motor began to whirl. The slides, displayed on a white wall on the far side of the living room, began to tell a story, with Doris Day's big band the perfect soundtrack. Every moment or so, the next photo slide would drop into the carousel with a clunk, and a new image would project onto the wall. Four girls sat smiling around a set table, and a woman, dressed to the nines in blue polka dots, stood beside them. In the image, the middle-aged woman passed a tray of cookies while the girls took sips of tea from beautiful bone China cups. The photos were of a birthday party, and a girl with a cute bob cut and long bangs was being celebrated. She wore a party hat. Everybody mugged cheery, birthday smiles for the camera.

Martha felt carried away by the faded memories flashing against the living room wall. Harold took most of the photos, but he was smiling in the frame where they brought out the birthday cake. "Oh, that reminds me!" Martha stood up to pause the slide show. Then, she hurried, as best she could, to the kitchen, bringing back a small white birthday cake, placing it in front of Brenda and lighting a candle before starting the slides up again. When the little girl in the projector blew out her candles, Martha helped Brenda blow out her candle, too. The old woman smiled, clapped, and looked back and

forth at the other dolls after the candle had been extinguished. She thought she heard Harold singing along.

A phone call interrupted the revelry. "Now, who could that be!" Martha slapped her napkin on the table, turned off the projector, and answered with a short, "Hello."

"Hi Mother, am I interrupting?"

"Brenda?"

"Who? Mom, it's me."

"I'm sorry. I was watching my program." She looked over at Brenda, who seemed antsy. "Hi Mandy, how are things?"

"Things are fine. Busy. Is the weather nice today?"

"Really lovely. The Lunch Bunch was able to eat outside." Martha tapped her foot and fidgeted with the phone cord. She really needed to get back to the party. "Honey, Caroline's starting to fuss. I need to be going."

"Who's Caroline?"

Martha remained silent, her eyes darting across the room. *Who is Caroline?* She closed her eyes to concentrate.

"Mom, have you eaten today?"

"Eaten? Why on Earth would you ask?" She looked down at the plate of cookies. "I'm eating right now."

"Who's Caroline?"

"You mean the baby?"



"You have a baby at the house?"

*Of course, I have a baby*, she thought to herself. She couldn't just gab all day like single women could. The baby needed her. All the girls did. After the party, they would still need to wash up and get ready for bed.

" Mom, Who's baby is it? Are you feeling ok?"

"Better than I've felt in ages, dear."

"Listen, should I ask Mr. Granger to come by again?" The last thing Martha wanted was the neighbor coming by to pester her. "Mom, he said he doesn't mind at all." She just wanted to enjoy the party. *Why couldn't she just be left alone?*

The record finished playing, and the needle scratched to a halt. Her mind felt fuzzy, like when the grocery clerks talked too quickly, or when the doctor asked her who was president. *Did she have babies*, she wondered. *Was Mandy still a baby?* Her mind was confusing her again.

"Mom, who is the baby?"

Martha saw the photo of Harold on the plate next to hers. Her mind slipped back into place, like the gramophone needle finding its groove. She just couldn't be rushed. "What? What? Did I say baby? It's a puppy." Martha forced a small laugh. "Caroline is just a friend's puppy. A sweet little terrier. No need to worry." She smoothed out her napkin on the table. "But I do need to get going, or the puppy will have an accident on the rug."

"I will call you tomorrow, Mom, and thanks again for the birthday card."

Martha couldn't hang the receiver up fast enough, pushing aside her irritation as she reset the slides in the carousel to return to the images of the party. The projector clicked to Harold at the table,

laughing, and little Amanda, her sweet Mandy, blowing out the candles. Before Martha pressed start, she re-lit the candle on the table. As the projector played, Martha led the dolls in singing “Happy Birthday” to Brenda with a twinkle and a tear in her eye. Martha made her own birthday wish that, this time around, the moment would last forever. She wished she could wrap Mandy’s birthday party back in cellophane, like the party dresses, for safe keeping, unlike the smoke from the birthday candle, that lingered for a just a moment before dissipating. The last slide clicked over, and the screen projected a bright white light. At the same time, Caroline, the babydoll, fell from her booster chair onto the table with a thud. The show was over. With a long exhale, Martha stood up. “You are a fool, Martha Mullins,” she muttered, dragging the doll by her dangling arm back to the guest bedroom.

“They are just dolls. Fun little playthings to pass the time,” Martha would tell herself later, cleaning up the party dishes, before she tucked her girls into their storage boxes underneath the twin beds. “Sleep tight my angels.” She blew a kiss into the empty room, turning on a night light before closing the door behind her.

Though the gramophone was turned off, Martha continued singing Doris Day as she tidied up.

*Picture you upon my knee  
Tea for two and two for tea  
Just me and you and you for me  
Nobody near us to see us or hear us  
No friends or relations on weekend vacations.*

Her song trailed off to a hum as she retrieved the electric sweeper from the pantry with a twirl. Harold would be so pleased that she was dancing again. She threw her head back and laughed, pulling the sweeper down with her into a slight dip. He was such a lovely dancer, she recalled as she and the sweeper promenaded down the hall. They kept perfect form moving together in lockstep-- outside right, outside left, then step together before falling into a two-hand hold just as easily as they used to, smooth as Jello. Harold spun her through the hallway to the living room, the skirt of her dress, now

spinning, its white dots floating in the air like butterflies just above her knees. As they turned, she saw their friends and family. So many people gathered around the table to celebrate Amanda's Confirmation. In the whirl, Martha saw her older sister, Betsey in the living room by the credenza. "I can't believe you came in all the way from Michigan," she shouted over Harold's shoulder as they danced. Another turn, and she spied her new neighbor, Bill Granger, an appliance salesman. Before he left, she wanted to ask him about replacing the old Kenmore.

Martha loved the feel of Harold's broad shoulders, his hands, so strong and warm against the small of her back, leading her as they danced. If she could, Martha would dance with him forever. She hoped he would take her to the Tower Ball Room over the weekend, but for now, the living room, surrounded by all their friends and family, suited Martha fine. As the music played on, she spied Mandy, standing in the kitchen doorway. Beautiful Amanda, in the swan song of her youth, nearly a woman. How proud Martha was of the bright and beautiful young lady she was becoming. All she could do was close her eyes and smile in gratitude. One more spin through Harold's arms, and she saw her parents, standing shoulder to shoulder next to Mandy in near the kitchen. *That can't be right*, Martha thought. "My parents aren't at this party," she said aloud. They both had died before Amanda finished grade school.

"Harold, I feel unwell." She let go and held her hand to her forehead, finding a seat at the dining room table. "I hope I didn't spoil Mandy's party," Martha said, asking Harold to fetch her a glass of water. The room spun around her. *Where was Harold?* Martha just needed another moment to compose herself, catch her breath. She must be getting too old for dancing. *How old is Amanda?* She opened her eyes and noticed four red booster seats stacked on a nearby chair. *She couldn't have had four children, could she?* It was something she and Harold had long prayed for, but, no, certainly she would remember if there were more. Martha looked down at the table and saw the six place settings, cookie crumbs spread across the old linen. Once again, she saw the black and white photo at Harold's

place setting- the company shot she used for his obituary because she loved his crooked smile. "Mrs. Harold Mullins, you truly are a fool!" Martha screamed and threw a crystal candle stick she had set out earlier for the party. Glass shattered across the table and into the piled carpet. Martha held her head, ashamed of the outburst. She never used to be like this, and now she had another mess to clean up. The old woman took a long exhale when she saw the electric sweeper resting on the table ledge. The room was so quiet, it buzzed.