

“She Wears Red Feathers...”

by

Jerry James

“She Wears Red Feathers...”

Sandra from Sedona was waiting at the train station, smoking a cigarette in the October night. She was bigger and blonder than she once was, but she still wore glasses. And she still stood six-foot-even, four inches taller than I.

“Sarah’s been moved to a hospice up in Connecticut,” she had said on the phone. “I’m here trying to get Mom’s house in shape so we can sell it. Can you come and see me Thursday, late?”

I could...

I had not been to this Jersey town since the summer I got out of the Army, a long time ago. In those days I drove a beat-up black Oldsmobile with *Dean Moriarty* centered on the rear bumper in self-adhesive letters, a sleeping bag thrown in the back seat and a trunk crammed full of the books I meant to read while I was on the road.

I read some of them...

“So how are you?” I asked, as we hugged in the kitchen.

“Sarah died at ten o’clock,” she said.

“Why didn’t you call me? I didn’t have to come.”

“I wanted you to come. It isn’t a very good night to be alone.”

I hugged her for a long time, which is difficult for a short-armed man when a woman is as bounteous as Sandy had grown to be. I tried to lock my fingers together, but every time she inhaled, they popped apart again.

This is not condescension. An intimate friend once described me as a short, hairy barrel. With glasses.

“It isn’t so bad, really. You see, I can’t cry. Sarah’s family’s up in Danbury running around weeping, and I’m calmly making plans. Maybe it makes me seem inhuman, but I can’t cry. The lithium won’t let me. And I went through it before,

with my mother.”

“I didn’t know your mother died of breast cancer.”

“She didn’t. They only found it after the stroke, her first stroke. The second one killed her before the cancer had a chance.”

Sandy had bought a bottle of wine. I had to open it because her hands were shaking, a side effect of the lithium.

“I knew when I came east that Sarah couldn’t last much longer. She went into the hospice two days after I landed at JFK. Her son was holding her hand when she died.” She took a long sip of the wine. “And yes, I got a mammogram.” I had been nagging her about that for months.

“So how are you? Not about Sarah. About you.”

“It’s... OK for me now. Russell and I are... OK. Wendy went to the high school dance looking like a young Anna Nicole Smith, and this twenty-one-year-old who works in the pizza parlor with her asked her out. And I have to see my ex-lover every day because he’s the mailman, but he was usually impotent, anyway.”

“That must not have been much fun.”

She laughed that funny laugh of hers, a laugh like a teenager’s. “It wasn’t. The graphics business is crawling back, which is good, because I had to quit my job to come east. Mail Boxes Etc. will just have to get along without me. How are things with you?”

“I couldn’t pay the October rent until the fifteenth.” I didn’t really want to talk about it. “What happened with the guy who’s twenty-one?”

“Well, Wendy and I agreed this was just too weird. But now he comes into the pizza joint when he’s not working and sits there and stares at her.”

“Like mother, like daughter.”

Sandy laughed her teenager’s laugh, a laugh so at odds with her bulk. “Oh, maybe...”

She was not quite eighteen the first time I heard her laugh, sitting in a shaft of that sun which is young once only, golden head, strong nose, coltish body with no hips, no behind, magnificent breasts.

Sandy's mother had always told her she wasn't very pretty, not with that nose, so she would probably never catch a man.

Her mother was a poor judge of the relative power of physical attributes...

"It's OK. It really is. But if I were still clinically depressed, I'd probably have wandered around the desert until I was eaten by coyotes or something."

"Well, you were always kind of manic-depressive."

"I was never *manic*-depressive. That's a bipolar depressive. I'm a *unipolar* depressive. I never got manic. I just stayed depressed."

We took our glasses of wine out on the cold back porch so she could smoke.

"The only other time I came to this house, you wouldn't even let me sleep on the couch. You were afraid of your mother!" I teased.

"I'm *still* afraid of my mother! She's dead, and I'm smoking out here, instead of smelling up her house."

"I had to sleep in the car in a vacant lot, because you told me not to come back until she was gone the next morning. Sheesh, I thought after taking you to a Broadway show and spending \$5.50 on you, you'd at least find me a place to sleep!"

We had seen Danny Kaye in *Two by Two*. Then we had frantically pawed each other. Then she'd sent me off to sleep in the car.

"Well, I seem to remember I made it up to you the next day," she drawled.

She had. Oh, yes, she had...

Out on the cold back porch, Sandra stubbed out her cigarette and freshened her mouth in mine. Our glasses got in the way, so we took them off.

Then she took me into the downstairs bedroom. Her hands did not shake. Her breasts were older, but they were still magnificent.

Sandy made the move. She was always the one who made the move. I am no good at things like that.

“I’ll never forget this,” she said, cuddling with me in what had been her parents’ bed. “We made love on the night Sarah died...”

I woke up early and quietly prowled around. The couch she wouldn’t let me sleep on was still in the basement.

Upstairs was Sandy’s old bedroom, where she had so exquisitely and inventively made it up to me. On the wall, framed and matted, hung a rendering, a painting of what the set looks like in the mind of the scene designer. The rendering was for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and it was very good.

It wasn’t just a good rendering, which any competent water colorist could turn out. It was also a good set design, which is much harder to do. Sandra had created a place in which one might actually imagine performing *Midsummer*. That is the hard part.

I know this because I have seen an awful lot of bad set designs...

Sandy threw on some sweats and drove us to a diner. We had breakfast, and she smoked, while we talked about bright college days when, for a few months, she was my back-door girlfriend.

“Mary thought you deliberately set out to steal her man,” I remarked. Mary had been my front-door girlfriend. “She called you a big-busted bridge troll.”

“Of course Miss Cupcake Chest thought that. Because I did.”

I had thought it was my idea, but as I said, I am no good at things like that.

Sandy and I had played together only once, fully clothed, before the day the heat went off in her dorm. “Why don’t you sleep over here tonight?” I offered, ever the humanitarian.

When I came home, I found her under a sheet in my bed, wearing her glasses and reading a book. Sandy put down the book, took off her glasses and lowered the

sheet. I don't remember noticing her nose.

Sandy was a virgin, but an avid one. I had not realized what might be accomplished with the endowments of a young woman who wished to retain her virginity, nor had she, but we were both willing to learn...

Sandra lit another cigarette. "Thanks for coming. You're—well, you're just about my oldest friend. Among other things." We both smiled.

"Indeed..."

"I'm glad I know you, Marty." I felt like George Bailey dealing with Violet Bick. The feeling was not unpleasant. "But you never wrote me a poem."

"I wrote you sexual fantasies."

"Yeah, but I can't show *those* to anybody." She was, after all, a respectable Republican matron. "I want a poem."

"When I get inspired."

"I thought last night would have done the trick," she smiled, leaning over the table so that one breast lay in my upturned palm.

"Don't be too naughty in public."

"Naughty? I ask only that I be judged on my unfulfilled decencies, rather than on my pluperfected misdemeanors."

My eyebrows shot up to my hairline. "Who said that?"

"Christopher Morley, I think. I've known it for years."

As I got out of the booth, my muscles creaked. "Geez, I must be falling apart."

"You? How about me? My back went just like that, Sarah's dead, even my sex drive isn't what it was."

"I'll alert the media."

"Look, after the funeral I'm going to stay another week and finish packing up the house. Can you help?"

Of course I could...

We spent the next Friday cleaning out the downstairs. I had to carry everything out to the curb because of Sandy's back.

There was a lot of stuff to carry because her mother had saved *everything*, letters from 1944, newspapers from the Seventies, all of Sarah and Sandra's old high school textbooks. Not yearbooks. *Textbooks*.

That night we pretended our ages added up to forty rather than ninety-seven. Saturday morning we tackled the upstairs bedroom.

"You saved all your letters to David?"

"No, my mother did, just in case I ever forgot."

David was the Coast Guardsman who had once been Sandy's putative groom. She lost her virginity to him in characteristically idiosyncratic fashion.

David had come to visit. Sandy had a cold, so she took an antihistamine, which made her drowsy. She awoke to find herself in the midst of defloration.

Perhaps Sandra should have realized right then that something was amiss, but instead she moved to San Diego to be David's bride.

By this time Mary and I had broken up, she had married someone else, and I was involved in the Late Unpleasantness in Southeast Asia.

When I received a letter from Sandra informing me of her impending nuptials, I sent a congratulatory note, happy that her ship had come safe to harbor. Then I put her out of my mind.

The day before the wedding, Sandy discovered David's wife, who informed her that this day was David's last in the Coast Guard. Tomorrow, he would be gone, and Sandy would be left waiting at the church.

Sandy bounced a Corelle cup off David's head, wrote the Corning people that it did not craze, chip or crack, came back east and sent me a letter. Soon after, I arrived on her doorstep in my Dean Moriarty Olds...

"You want to keep the letters?"

She stuffed them into the trash bag without looking.

“That’s a beautiful rendering, the one of *Midsummer*.”

“It won third prize in a national design contest when I was twenty.”

“Going to ship it home?”

“Going to ditch it.”

“What is that, the lithium talking? It’s beautiful.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t mean anything to me, not now.”

“Even Mr. Spock played the electronic zither.”

“Vulcans have nothing on lithium.”

“Want any of these records?” I said quickly.

“Only one, if you find it. It’s a song about this doll, or something, and the lyrics have something about red feathers and a hoolie-hoolie skirt.”

“She wears red feathers and a hoolie-hoolie skirt,” I sang. *“She wears red feathers and a hoolie-hoolie skirt.”*

“Yes!” She all but leapt in the air. “Sing me some more!”

“That’s all I can remember. I don’t even know the name of the song.”

“Oh,” she said.

We didn’t find the record...

The spring after my visit to her house, Sandra wrote asking if we might meet at her grad school. She got into my Dean Moriarty Olds, smiled and said, “Got any rubbers?”

Sandy made the move. She was always the one who made the move. I am no good at things like that.

All the stores were closed, but I finally found some condoms in a coin-operated dispenser in the men’s room of some dive. Sandy had brought quarters.

For music I set the TV in the motel room to the cable guide station. When I entered her for the first time, *Here, There and Everywhere* was playing...

I carried boxes and boxes of history down the stairs and piled them on the curb, while Sandy smoked a cigarette. Then we took a break to eat. She cleared off the kitchen table, and I opened the refrigerator.

“What the hell is this?” The fridge was chock-full of Tastykakes, more than twenty boxes. It looked as if she’d called the factory and ordered one of everything. Way in the back of the fridge was a six-pack of Yoo-hoo.

“I can’t get Tastykakes in Sedona, and I just buried my sister. Are you going to eat or not?” She grabbed an armful of boxes and set them on the table. I sat down with a can of Yoo-hoo.

“You’re really going to ditch the *Midsummer* rendering?”

“I thought you were over that.” She handed me a Butterscotch Krimpet.

“It’s yours. You can do what you want with it. But I think—well, never mind what I think.” I put the Krimpet back in the box.

Sandy offered a Peanut Butter KandyKake. “You live in the past, do you know that? The rendering. That ditzy Mary.”

“Well, the door of the past has been getting kicked down a lot lately.” I refused the KandyKake.

“She was a ditz.”

“What were you?”

“I was smart.” She lobbed me a Coconut Junior. “Marty, anyone who stays in the theatre past the age of thirty is crazy. That’s why I’m worried about you.”

“Wait. Your mother and sister both get breast cancer, and you’re worried about *me*?” I lobbed it back.

“You know what my uncle used to ask me? He’d say, ‘Whaddya think you’re ever gonna do with that degree?’” She flipped me a Koffee Kake.

“Good question. What did you do?” I flipped it back.

“I was a scene painter. I was an instructor at Trenton State. I hated it.” She

softballed me a Banana Creamie. I caught it one-handed and set it down on the table.

“Hated the work?”

“No, hated the money. I quit after a year when Russell got the graphics business off the ground.” She backhanded a Chocolate Mini Donut off my chest. I let it bounce.

“And moved to Sedona, where there are no Tastykakes.”

“And where it’s as far away from my mother as I could get. We make six figures. I have a lovely home and family.” She threw a Strawberry Iced Snack Bar at my head, hard, but she missed.

“You make six figures *sometimes*. You spent the past year as a package wrapper with a master’s degree.”

“Year and a half! But it comes back. The business always comes back. You make four hundred a week working with kids who have as much chance of getting an acting job as I have of being elected Pope.”

“I’m their object lesson in how hard it is.”

“You never worked on Broadway. You worked Off Broadway *once*. What’s going to happen to you in ten years? You’re fine now, but what happens when you’re sixty?”

“What happens to you?” I lobbed a Chocolate Creamie. “You live on Tastykakes and Yoo-hoo.” I tossed a Butterscotch Krimpet. “You smoke like Mount St. Helens.” I hit her with an Orange Glazed Donut Hole. “And you play do-me-naked with anybody who knocks on the door!” I stopped in the act of throwing a Creme Filled Butter Cream Cupcake. “How much older is Russell than you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Are we kids or what? How much older?”

“Fifteen years.”

“No problem twenty years ago when you’re twenty-five and he’s forty. How is it now?”

Suddenly she was hailing Tastykakes on me with both hands, Chocolate Juniors and Jelly Krimpets and Pineapple Cheese Pies.

“This is my *life*, you shit! My *life!* You’d have had me broke for the past twenty years, pretending everything was just *ducky*, because we were so goddam *fortunate* to be able to pretend we were *artists!*”

“Yeah, but at least you wouldn’t have ended up a fat slut with jello tits!”

Her slap sent my glasses flying across the kitchen.

We looked at each other for a minute. Then I bent down and picked up my glasses.

When I put them back on, I saw that Sandra had taken hers off. Then she took off her sweatshirt.

Sandy wasn’t wearing a bra.

She glared at me, unsmiling, as she kicked off her shoes and dropped her sweatpants.

She wasn’t wearing any panties, either.

Sandy made the move. She was always the one who made the move. I am no good at things like that.

She kicked the sweats aside, and then she enveloped me.

Four hundred pounds of naked, middle-aged flesh can take a terrible toll on a kitchen floor strewn with Banana Creamies, Coconut Juniors, Pineapple Cheese Pies, Creme Filled Butter Cream Cupcakes, Peanut Butter KandyKakes, Butterscotch Krimpets and Orange Glazed Donut Holes.

When I came out of the shower, Sandra was holding the *Midsummer* rendering. She handed it to me, and I took it...

Over decaf in the diner, Sandy said, “I have breast cancer.”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“I had the mammogram. I had the biopsy. This is not a joke.”

“Why didn’t you—”

“No pity!” she said, so loudly that the waitress looked around.

Never miss a good opportunity to keep your mouth shut, someone once told me. This seemed like a good opportunity.

“I wanted you to make love to me with no pity.” She lit a cigarette, and I kept my mouth shut.

“I have two choices. One, I die. Two, they cut off my tits. I’m very fond of my breasts, but I can live without them. Literally. I want to dance at my daughter’s wedding. I don’t need breasts for that. But I do need to be alive.”

“Anna Nicole Smith married an eighty-year-old billionaire. Maybe Wendy will, too.”

“Maybe I should have.” It seemed a good idea not to touch that one. “I don’t want anyone looking at me with pity. I’m going to be the lucky one, because I’m going to get to *live*. So why be depressed? Besides, I can’t be depressed—I’m on lithium!

“The only bad part is that they sever all the nerves, so my chest will feel like wood. But the people who love me won’t mind, and the people who hate me will just have another reason to do so, right?”

“Right,” I said, with more conviction than I felt.

“Eventually, though—no getting around it—the breast cancer will kill me. When it does, I want you to deliver my eulogy.”

“Me?”

“Who else loved my breasts so much?” She smiled. “It’ll be the poem you never wrote for me. I don’t want someone who didn’t even *know* me talking about me.”

“Sandy, a lot of the things I know about you might seem out of place at a memorial service.”

“I know. You won’t say them then. You’ll say them afterwards, to Wendy.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea—”

“My mother and my sister and I all developed breast cancer. Do you think Wendy’s immune?” She took a drag on her cigarette while waiting for me to answer her rhetorical question. I didn’t. “Swear to me you’ll tell her I should be judged on my unfulfilled decencies, rather than on my pluperfected misdemeanors.”

“Lean forward,” I said.

“What?”

“Lean forward.” As she did, I placed my hands, palms upward, underneath her breasts. “When the Romans gave testimony, they swore on their testicles. If you’re asking me to give breastimony, I have to swear on your breasts.”

Sandy laughed, free and open and immortal. “Then swear.”

“I do,” I said.

When I got home, I hung the *Midsummer* rendering on my wall...

For Valentine’s Day, I sent Sandy *Guy Mitchell’s Greatest Hits*. The first song on the CD is *She Wears Red Feathers*.

An Englishman has a respectable job in a bank. One night in a music hall he sees a travelogue in which a South Seas native girl smiles at him.

He chucks everything and sails off to find her. When he does, she tells him she has dreamed of him every night. They wed and return to England, where they are very happy as they walk down Piccadilly.

She wears red feathers and a hoolie-hoolie skirt.

The lyrics are ambiguous on this point, but I am sure her breasts are bare...

THE END