

A JOY FOREVER

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Gwen Harlowe had been a florist, my mother said, and had met Uncle Mike when he came to her neat, brisk, Beacon Street shop to order flowers for his first wife's funeral. Automatically sympathetic to widowers, she'd helped him choose between carnations and chrysanthemums, between irises and gladioli. Something must have blossomed, for barely six months later he invited us to Boston for the wedding.

Though I was still in college and a long way from being a professional photographer, Uncle Mike had me take the wedding pictures—good experience for me, he said, and less money wasted for him. In some ways, the challenge proved too much for me: I had a hard time finding backgrounds the bride didn't fade into. She was small, quiet, and pale, at least ten years younger than my uncle but no match for his energy. Whenever I posed them together, she seemed diminished. In every picture I took, from whatever angle I tried, she looked like his sandy-colored shadow.

But she adored him. At the reception, she welded herself to his arm, her blushes a shy hint of glow against beige as she gazed at him with joyous gratitude. It was poignant. Even at twenty, I knew it was poignant. When my mother wished them happiness, I choked up. Since I didn't know Uncle Mike well yet, I thought they had a chance.

One year later, I knew better. I spent the summer in Boston, working at Uncle Mike's used-car dealership, so hard up for cash that I often accepted his invitations to have dinner at their house. That's when I learned just how miserable a marriage can be. I sat at their table and cringed.

"I could get a better meal at McDonald's," he said, bouncing his fork against a leathery, grilled chicken cutlet, sinking it into a too-soft Brussels sprout. "I could find cleaner bathrooms there too. You waste hours puttering around in your damn flower garden, and meanwhile you let the house go to hell."

"I'm sorry, Mike." Aunt Gwen's blushes looked nothing like those of the happy bride of just one year ago. These were pained, embarrassed blushes. "I'm trying to make a comfortable home for you. Really, I am."

"It sure doesn't look like you're trying. Remember what you said the first time we talked about getting married?" He raised his voice in a high-pitched, simpering parody. "Oh, Mike—I just want to make you *happy*. I

just want to take *care* of you.” He lowered his voice again. “But you haven’t done it. You don’t know how. You spent too many years in that stupid flower shop, fussing over bouquets and boutonnieres and I-don’t-know-what.”

The flower shop, I now knew, had been the motive for the marriage. The gossip at the dealership was that Uncle Mike had been critically short of cash, in danger of losing his business. Then he met Gwen Harlowe, eager for marriage and owner of a solid little shop with a paid-up mortgage. It hadn’t been hard to persuade her to sell the shop, turn her assets over to him, and trade her lonely independence for the glory of being Mrs. Mike Mallinger. Within months, his business was thriving, and she was desperately trying to become an acceptable drudge. She didn’t have a penny of her own now. She was utterly dependent, utterly helpless.

It made me feel sick to see one human being so thoroughly subdued by another. At the end of August, I drove away, sure I’d never return. Now, six years later, I was driving back. Mother talked me into it. If I was determined to waste another vacation on another hopeless freelance project, she said, I should stay with Uncle Mike and Aunt Gwen instead of squandering money on hotels. Since I didn’t, in fact, have any money to squander, I gave in. But I wasn’t happy. When my partner offered to come along, I said no. I’m all for confronting prejudices and shattering stereotypes. But not with Uncle Mike, not now.

As I pulled into the driveway, I caught my first glimpse of Aunt Gwen. She looked even smaller now, even paler, even quieter. The flower garden she’d cherished had been replaced by sturdy, undemanding shrubs that gave her no excuse for neglecting housework. She’s surrendered, I thought. The last symbol of her personality has been plowed under. It was sad, but not surprising.

Uncle Mike, though—the change in him shocked me. He’d always been stocky; now, he was obese. He must have gained a hundred pounds since the last time I’d seen him, and they hung on him flabbily.

“Good to see you again, Chris,” he said. “So, what do you think of the lawn? Not bad, huh? And it’s all Gwen’s doing.” He swatted her behind affectionately. Did she flinch? I couldn’t be sure. “She took over the yard work years ago. Says I shouldn’t have to fuss with that after a long day at the lot. And, by God, she’s right.”

We walked into the house, where every surface glistened—dust free, hard polished, lemon saturated. Aunt Gwen slipped into the kitchen and then reappeared with a tray: two mugs of beer, a bowl of potato chips, a mound of dip studded with chopped sausage and hunks of hard-boiled eggs. Uncle Mike handed one mug to me, took a long gulp from the other, and scooped an inch of dip onto his first chip.

“Gwen’s turned into quite a little cook,” he said. “It was rough going at first, but after a year or so—well! You wouldn’t believe how many cook-books she has. She’s taken cooking courses, too, and she watches Food

Network shows every day. You won't have any complaints about the food here this time."

I didn't. Dinner was overwhelmingly delicious—glazed ham dripping with raisin sauce, baked potatoes buried in butter and sour cream, crispy fried cauliflower, salad with thick Ranch dressing, home-baked cinnamon rolls. Aunt Gwen nibbled at the edges of the feast, toying with her salad, saying hardly anything, watching Uncle Mike.

"So, about this project of yours, Chris," he said. "You're taking pictures for an insurance company calendar?"

"That's right," I said as Aunt Gwen buttered another roll and slipped it onto his plate. "Revere Mutual's putting together a calendar to give their customers. New England scenes—that's the theme. And they're taking submissions from freelancers."

"Is there much money in that?" he asked. Aunt Gwen had carved him another slice of ham. He waved it off halfheartedly but cut into it when she put it on his plate.

"Not really," I admitted. "But the calendar will be distributed nationwide, so it'd be good exposure. It might help me get established as a real photographer."

"Hell, you're a real photographer already." He held out his wineglass so Aunt Gwen could refill it. "Your mom told me how many weddings you handled last year. And you did class pictures for some elementary schools, right?"

"That's not the kind of photography I really want to do," I said, wondering why I was bothering to explain my ambitions to this idiot, and why Aunt Gwen was spooning still more dressing onto his scraps of lettuce. "I want to say something with my pictures."

Uncle Mike guffawed. "Now, what can you say with a calendar picture? Unless it's a pinup calendar. The Girls of New England. Those pictures say plenty—right, Gwen?" He nudged her with his elbow, almost knocking the salt shaker from her hand. Undeterred, she kept sprinkling his baked potato.

"It's not that kind of calendar." My voice sounded stiff, even to me. "I want to say something about what New England means to me, about my memories of summers at Grandma's house. I'm trying to take a picture for July, and I figure most people will go for trite stuff, fireworks or Paul Revere's house. I want to capture something subtler. I've got all these pictures in my mind—Grandpa cranking up a batch of ice cream, Grandma telling stories in the evening. That's what comes to my mind when I think of New England. Serenity. Security. Contentment. I want to get *that* in a photograph."

Aunt Gwen's hand froze halfway to Uncle Mike's plate, her serving spoon sagging under its load of fried cauliflower. A soft look came into her eyes, and a faint but real smile tugged at her lips. She understands, I thought, and felt glad I'd explained.

"Sounds like sentimental crap." Uncle Mike leaned back to pat his stomach. "Not bad, Gwen. What's for dessert?"

Dessert was chocolate pie—French-silk chocolate pie, she said meekly—and it was richer and thicker than any pie I'd tasted before. She took a sliver for herself but carved slabs for us, hiding them under mounds of whipped cream. After taking two bites, she retreated to the kitchen. Moments later, I heard the water running and knew she was washing dishes.

Uncle Mike went back to talking about the calendar. "It's not that I don't like art," he assured me. "Not photographs so much, but I love sculpture. If it's really beautiful, that is. Then it's a joy forever, like Shakespeare says."

Keats, I thought; and it's "as," not "like." But I kept quiet. I understood how Aunt Gwen had been worn down by this man. I just hoped he wouldn't force me to admire the porcelain nude again.

He pointed to the mantelpiece. "Now, *that's* what I mean."

I had to do it. I had to follow his gesture with my eyes, to look at The Thing. It was almost two feet tall, a lumpy ceramic statue of a generously endowed naked woman sitting, inexplicably, on a tree trunk, and it was painted and glazed in a way too horrifying to describe. Uncle Mike gazed at it with more affection than he'd ever shown either of his wives. "*That's* a joy forever," he said. "I bought it when I sold my first car, thirty-two years ago this October. Blew my whole commission on one statue, and I've never regretted it. If you could come up with something *that* beautiful, Chris, it'd be worth the time."

Aunt Gwen slunk back into the dining room, to cut Uncle Mike a second slice of pie. At least, I thought, she's won some peace for herself. At least there can't be a repetition of what happened on my last night here six years ago, when Uncle Mike, enraged by an overdone roast, lashed out and slapped her face, hard. I'd gasped; that had been enough to make him glare at me, to make it clear he'd be glad to start on me if I said anything.

That was my deepest reason for hating him. He'd made me stare at my plate and pretend I didn't hear Aunt Gwen's sobs. He'd terrified me and made me despise myself. At least, I thought again, nothing like that can happen tonight.

I was wrong. It happened when Aunt Gwen crept into the den with our bedtime snack: ham and cheese sandwiches, creamy potato salad, triple-decker brownies, two more mugs of beer. Astonished, I stared at the tray.

"This looks great, Aunt Gwen," I said. "But I'm still full from dinner, and I'm not used to eating so late at night."

"Can't go to bed on an empty stomach, Chris," Uncle Mike said. "Besides, Gwen makes the best potato salad in town."

He beamed at her; but as she set down his mug, her hand shook, and some beer sloshed onto the coffee table.

"Clumsy," he said, and smacked her shoulder with the palm of his hand. It was rough, but almost absentminded. It probably happened often. "Watch the furniture."

"I'm sorry, Mike," she said, and I realized I was surprised to hear her use his first name. It would've seemed more natural for her to call him "Mr. Mallinger."

It felt good to get out of the house early the next morning, while Uncle Mike was still working through his second platter of pancakes and sausages, and climb into my car to begin my quest for the soul of New England. The quest turned out to be tougher than I'd expected. It's not easy to take photographs that radiate serenity, security, and contentment, at least not if you're a stranger in town.

First, I tried a park, standing behind a tree to photograph toddlers at play. I ended up pleading with a policeman and the zealous day-care teacher who'd summoned him, trying to convince them I wasn't a child pornographer scouting for talent. I spent the afternoon approaching senior citizens who scowled when I suggested they whip up some ice cream or gather grandchildren for story hour. What, they wanted to know, was I really up to? Was I selling something? By the time I returned to Uncle Mike's house, I'd begun to think that he might have a point after all, that a life spent taking studio portraits and carefully posed candids might not be so bad.

His car wasn't in the driveway, so I went to the back door, figuring Aunt Gwen would be in the kitchen. Instead, she sat in a rocking chair on the screened-in porch, humming softly as she made delicate stitches in a large square of linen stretched across an embroidery hoop. She scrambled to her feet when she saw me.

"Dinner's almost ready," she said nervously. "I was just about to go back to the kitchen. I'll get you a beer and some snacks."

"Please don't get up," I said. "I'm not hungry, and I'd love to sit out here with you for a while. I bet we've got plenty of time before Uncle Mike gets home."

I think she liked the conspiratorial tone of the last sentence. She smiled and sat back down. "You came home earlier than I expected. Did you find lots of good subjects right away?"

"No, I got discouraged right away. I don't know if I'll ever find a good subject. I guess part of the problem is that I don't really know what I'm looking for."

"But you do," she said. "You expressed it so well last night. I know exactly what you mean. And I'm sure you'll find it eventually. Sometimes, you can't make good things happen right away. But if you don't give up, if you're patient, you'll get what you want."

"*You're* sure patient." I walked over to look at her tapestry. "That's lovely, Aunt Gwen. Did you design it yourself? Are you going to fill in all that space with those tiny flowers? That takes more patience than I'll ever have."

The design consisted of a mass of flowers—not arranged in a landscape or vase, not forming a pattern in any usual sense, but a joyous profusion ordered by a harmony I could feel but not define. The colors were dazzling, the

variety of flowers amazing. No two were exactly alike, and some, I was sure, bloomed only in her imagination, never in any garden. And each flower was composed of dozens of tiny stitches. Each must have taken hours to create.

She blushed—a proud, vibrant blush this time. “I’m glad you like it. I’ve been working on it for a long time. A long, long time. I take it out whenever I have a spare minute. So I can’t do much at a time. But I work on it every day.” Her smile hardened. “Every single day. I’ll never give up, not till I finish. And when it’s done—why, when it’s done, it’s going to be wonderful.”

She sat staring at nothing, silent and motionless. Then she shook herself. “I’d better get to the kitchen. Mike likes his appetizers ready right when he gets home.” She gathered up needles, thread, and scissors, placed them in a paper bag with her tapestry, and hid the evidence of her frivolity in the back of a corner cupboard, behind sacks of flour and sugar. “I hope you like Italian food,” she said.

I do like Italian food, and I was awed by the dinner: lemon veal scaloppine, baked ziti thick with tomato sauce and mozzarella, roasted onions in a balsamic glaze, sautéed mushrooms, hunks of garlic bread, dusky Chianti. I ate Aunt Gwen’s cooking, listened to Uncle Mike rant about lazy employees, and thought of the tapestry hidden in the cupboard. It’s her last link to her former life, I thought. Now, those meticulously stitched flowers are the only ones she can have, and even those she doesn’t dare show to her husband. She can never display what she’s created—their house will be disfigured by his hulking, vulgar statue, not graced by the painstaking work of her hands. I watched her pile more food on his plate and felt profound pity. She has no hope, I thought. She’s so trapped that she can’t even dream of any escape beyond brief retreats to fields of imaginary flowers.

“So Henderson had made such a mess of the books,” Uncle Mike was saying, “that I had to spend the whole afternoon straightening them out. Couldn’t even get away for a round of golf. I swear I’ll fire the old fool next time.” His face flushed clear up to his scalp, and sweat ran down his neck. “Gwen, turn up the air conditioner. It’s hot as hell in here.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and leapt up to obey.

“I’m glad to hear you still golf sometimes, Uncle Mike,” I said, hoping to steer the talk toward pleasanter subjects.

“Yeah, and I’ve got a great golf cart now. Gwen gave it to me. She saved up for years, always putting something aside from her clothing allowance. It’s a beauty—plenty of room for a cooler of beer. Sure beats tramping all over the golf course, lugging those heavy clubs.” He gazed at her almost fondly. “She’s turned out okay. Not much for looks, but she takes good care of me.”

I couldn’t believe he’d said it. As a gesture of sympathy, I rose when she did, helped clear the table, and stayed to dry dishes. As I watched her standing at the sink, sympathy overpowered me again. She was barely fifty but looked like an old woman—bent, scrawny, exhausted, her graying hair

pulled back in a tight bun. And her drab, shapeless dress had to be at least a decade old.

"You spend so much on Uncle Mike," I chided. "The golf cart, all that food and liquor. Spend something on yourself. Go to a beauty parlor and have your hair cut and styled. Buy yourself some new clothes."

She laughed softly. "Oh, Mike really needs what I buy for him—he really, really does. And I don't care how my hair looks, and I don't need new clothes." Her smile hardened again. "Not yet."

I felt so moved, and so sorry, that I leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "You're too good to him."

"You think so?" She looked at me thoughtfully. "You're a friend, aren't you, Chris? Well, that's nice. It's nice to have a friend in the house. It's handy." She set the last dish in the drainer and dried her hands on her apron. "I do believe everything's ready," she said, more to herself than to me.

My second outing with my camera proved a second failure. When I tried to coax people into posing, they snarled. When I tried to take candid, I got beaten off with canes and purses. Eventually, I shot some pictures of squirrels, trying to convince myself they epitomized New England's serenity, security, and contentment.

It was a miserable day. As the temperature climbed, everyone turned sweatier and surlier. The sidewalks burned, the grass drooped, and even the birds looked damp and listless. Enough, I decided. Tomorrow, I head for Vermont and take pictures of barns.

When I arrived at the house, I saw the windows standing open. No, I thought. Not today. Aunt Gwen toiled at the stove, her dress clinging moistly to her body. The air conditioning, she said, had stopped working several hours ago, and she couldn't find anyone to fix it. So she'd opened up the house to let in some fresh air.

I didn't have the heart to criticize her, but she couldn't have made a worse decision. The air outside wasn't fresh. It was stale, breezeless, hotter than the air in the house could have been. Much better, on such a day, to close windows and curtains against the sun, to hoard the last traces of cool the night and the air conditioner had left behind.

And better, too, to fix a light meal for once. I staggered as she outlined the dinner menu: fried chicken with inch-thick coating; cornbread dressing; mashed potatoes with gravy; corn on the cob, with plenty of butter; biscuits, with more butter; chocolate cake with fudge icing.

"All of Mike's favorites," she said brightly.

Despite the heat, she seemed brisk and cheerful as she fussed among pots and pans. She even hummed. At first, I didn't recognize the tune. Then I realized it was "Tonight," from *West Side Story*. I smarted at the irony of it, at this defeated woman humming a tune so full of hope and romance.

When he got home, Uncle Mike was in a foul mood. He swore first at the air conditioner, then at Aunt Gwen, shouting that he knew damn well

she could've found a repairman if she'd tried. I started to protest, but she caught my eye, shook her head, and smiled, placidly bringing him his beer, dip, and chips. As he stuffed them down, he fumed about his day.

For once, he had real reasons to be angry. At noon, his secretary got a call saying a rival car dealer was facing bankruptcy and liquidating his assets. If Uncle Mike got to Quincy right away, he could snap up his competitor's cars for practically nothing. So he drove for an hour through pounding heat and thickening traffic, only to discover that his competitor was not going bankrupt, that he'd sooner die than sell Uncle Mike a punctured tire, that the call had been somebody's idea of a joke. Uncle Mike accused his competitor of faking the call himself, obscenities were exchanged, they shoved each other around the showroom, a police officer was summoned, and he reprimanded them both.

Uncle Mike ranted about it throughout dinner, eating ferociously, not seeming to notice how many chicken bones and corncobs towered up on his plate, how much stuffing and potatoes and biscuits and wine plummeted down his gullet. After dinner, Aunt Gwen started to fade into the kitchen. Again, I stood up to help her. This time, she wouldn't allow it.

"No, Chris," she said. "Not tonight. Actually, I'm not going to do the dishes right now. I have to finish dusting the living room first."

Uncle Mike frowned. "Why didn't you get that done during the day?"

"Didn't have time," she said. Her tone wasn't as deferential as usual. She almost shrugged.

Uncle Mike sat at the head of the table, his back to the living room. I sat to his right, so I had a clear view of Aunt Gwen as she got her furniture polish and dustcloth from the kitchen and bustled about, humming "Tonight" again. She dusted the coffee table, the lamps, the bookcase. She dusted the mantel. She lifted up Uncle Mike's ceramic nude, held it in her left hand, prepared to dust the spot it had covered. And she let the statue drop.

The crash was spectacular. Uncle Mike's head jerked. He turned slowly, his mouth falling open as he saw the powdery remains of his treasure—a hand here, a bit of tree trunk there, a hunk of blonde hair under the coffee table. His eyes filled with shock, with grief, with rage.

Aunt Gwen sighed. "Oops," she said.

That did it. "Oops?" He stood up, knocking his chair aside. He turned to me, pointing at Aunt Gwen with a trembling finger. "She said 'oops'! She destroys the most beautiful, the most precious thing I own, and she says 'oops!'"

Aunt Gwen looked bored. "It was old anyway."

"Old!" he echoed incredulously. "Yeah, it was old. I've had it thirty-two years—thirty-two years, ever since I sold my first car. Art gets *more* valuable when it gets older, you moron. It was probably worth a fortune by now. And it was a thing of beauty. It shoulda been a joy forever, like Shakespeare says."

"Keats," she pointed out, serenely. "And it's 'as,' not 'like.'"

Uncle Mike's face passed from red to purple. His chest heaved. "Don't you start with me! You little bitch! I oughtta break you in two!"

I'd frozen, but I had to act. "Uncle Mike," I said, standing up. "Calm down. It was an accident. Don't—"

"Stay out of it, Chris," Aunt Gwen snapped. "Sit down." She turned her taunting face to Uncle Mike. "Let him hit me if he wants. If he *can*. Go ahead, Mike. See if you can drag that carcass of yours across the room. Just try to hit me, you disgusting slob."

Roaring, he lunged at her. Before he could get close, she darted to the side. Then she was in the dining room. Spinning around, he charged after her. Sweat poured down his face, his breath turned shallow, and the veins in his neck bulged out, pressing against his triple chin. Laughing, Aunt Gwen raced around the table and back to the living room.

"Can't catch me, can you, Mike?" she said. "You're too slow. And you're as ugly as that stupid statue." She kicked a porcelain arm across the room, giggling when it shattered against the wall. "God! Am I glad to see the last of *that!*"

Uncle Mike stopped a foot away from her, gasping, snorting. The revolt of his slave had shocked him more than the loss of his statue. "You—you—" he started, and grabbed at his chest. His face contorted, and he stared at her. "You," he managed, and crumbled.

There were so many people to talk to that night—the neighbors who heard him yelling, the paramedics, the emergency room nurses, the undertaker. At one point, I found myself alone with Uncle Mike's doctor.

"I warned him," the doctor said. "I told him, 'Mike, you're begging for a heart attack. Lay off the booze, the sugar, the fat, the salt.' But did he listen? And I wish he'd never gotten that damn golf cart. I don't think the man ever got any exercise. Some, I guess, working in the yard, but obviously not enough." He shook his head. "He should've learned to control his temper too. The paramedics told me what the neighbors said. To blow up at his wife because she broke some knickknack while dusting! The poor little thing. What a shame her last memories of her husband had to be so ugly."

The poor little thing, however, seemed to be doing fine, accepting condolences graciously and giving crisp directions to the undertaker. When we got home, she slipped down to the basement. Moments later, I heard the hum of the air conditioner, and Gwen came back upstairs.

"I thought I might as well tinker with it myself," she said, "and I think I actually fixed it. Help me close the windows, won't you? Then let's sit on the porch while the house cools. We'll let the dishes be. I've got lemonade in the fridge—want some? Mike never cared for it, but I think there's nothing better on a hot night."

I called my mother. Yes, I said, I'd stay until after the funeral. There was so much to do. Tomorrow, Gwen wanted to gather up the things she was

donating to Goodwill—Uncle Mike’s clothes, Uncle Mike’s golf clubs, her cookbooks.

By the time I joined her on the back porch, she was rocking slowly, sewing by the light of an electric lantern. “Come sit down, Chris,” she said. “It’s turned into a lovely evening, hasn’t it? I do believe the heat will break tomorrow.”

I settled down on the porch swing. “You’ll have more time for sewing now,” I said.

“In the evenings,” she agreed. “Of course, I’ll have so many other things to do, too. Tomorrow, I’ll get my hair cut and buy some decent clothes—for the funeral, and so forth. Then I’ll see about selling the business. Perhaps I’ll call Bill Morgan.”

“Bill Morgan?”

“Yes, he owns a lot in Quincy. He was one of my late husband’s competitors. I hear his business is flourishing, and he’s thinking of moving to a better location. Then I’ll look for a florist’s shop—a bigger one this time, with a greenhouse.” She gazed at her tapestry. “But I won’t give up my sewing. Some day, this will look just lovely over the mantel. So I’ll work on it every chance I get—little by little, day by day, until it’s finished. That’s the way to get things done.”

“Gwen,” I said, “may I get my camera?”

That was the picture that got me my first sale, that won me my first award, that gave me my start as a freelance photographer. Gwen laughed at the thought of being a pinup girl at her age, but she was a good sport about it, even when the picture attracted so much attention that the company decided to use it every year, as its perennial July scene.

She’s sitting in her big pine rocker, on her screened-in porch, sewing her delicate fantasy of flowers, her hair pulled back in a bun, her faded cotton dress soft in the lantern light. I take some credit for the composition of the picture, for working in the glass of lemonade on the wicker stand, the apron hanging on a hook near the door. But I can’t fool myself. It was Gwen’s face that made the picture famous, made everyone agree my camera had captured the soul of New England. Serenity. Security. Contentment.

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