

Mary of Solitude

A short story by Anna Rose Walter

The story I am about to tell you is insignificant. It is filled with people no one has heard about or will ever hear about again. It is most likely a trifling story to you, but to me, it is my whole life. I must write it down so please bear with me, reader, as I write this account.

You must go with me back into the year 1856. I was a young, eager farmer then out on the Yorkshire moors and I had a delicate young wife whom I had married there as my companion. She was a pretty thing with chestnut hair and sparkling eyes and how I love her now when I think about her! In those days I hated her. She bore me a daughter, and fool that I was, I thought only a son was worth having to help with work. She bore the girl on a stormy night in the middle of October and held her precious daughter in her arms. I showed no emotion and love when I saw the two together and afterwards kept mostly to myself and my work, only coming in and eating with them after work. She did not seem to mind or even notice. She was too busy caring for her new daughter. Little did I see how weak and tired she was growing. Poor girl, she was not even twenty and had the weight of the world on her shoulders with no one to talk to or help her.

One night it happened. I came trudging home one night out of the fields, my mind busy on crops and work. I creaked the old wooden door open on its hinges and as usual took my muddy boots off at the door and looked towards the table to see if dinner was set. The table was empty. Grumbling to myself I sliced a piece of bread to curb my hunger and on purpose did not call out or look for my wife in the next room. "Most likely she is being idle just to anger me," I thought. As my knife was cutting the loaf, a small whimpering sound caught my attention. I swallowed my pride, went into the next room and the sight that met my eyes made my heart stop. My wife was on the bed—the baby was in her arms fretting and whimpering. I touched my wife. She was cold. She had suffered with the harsh climate, but I am sure that I helped speed her death with my behavior and carelessness for her health. I tried not to think about it then.

The funeral was held the next day and I hired a housekeeper to look after my child. "A terrible waste of money having to keep servants," I thought. "With a boy, after four years he could be with me in the fields." As to the matter of a name for this baby, that was settled. My wife had, without my knowing it, kept a journal when her child was born and every day wrote in it all sorts of domestic details about her daughter, such as how big she was growing, when she started to crawl and so on. Along with this information, in one entry she had written about the name she wanted her baby to be called:

December 12, 1856

Today as my child was sleeping and I gazed on her angelic face, a terror overcame me that she would have the same fate as mine someday. I could not bear that she would marry and have the same abominable treatment. Thinking on this made me realize I have not yet chosen a name for her. John, I need not write, has no such interest in the subject, so I finally chose a suitable name with a perfect meaning. My great grandmother, who was part Spanish was named Marisol and I knew it was the right name when I remembered the meaning! It means "girl of solitude." My prayer is that my daughter will have a life full of happy solitude shared with no husband like mine.

I felt unsettled reading this entry, and disturbed to see how much my attitude really had influenced the mind of my young wife. I tried to put it out of my mind and needless to say, I did not call my daughter Marisol, but Mary which was much more suitable and sensible a name.

The years rolled by and Mary got on well with her housekeeper. She grew into a pretty, well-mannered child and everything was running smoothly, so I thought, until my peace was disrupted one night. I was writing my accounts at my desk late one night till I heard a soft knock at my door. "Come in," I said and did not turn around. It was my housekeeper bringing in some tea for me. Instead of leaving immediately she looked at me. "Up so late?" She asked, stalling, I could tell.

"Yes, I have a lot of work to do," I said, still not looking at her and keeping my eyes obstinately on my book.

"Please sir, there is something I must talk about with you," she said and her tone of voice startled me. I turned my chair and looked at her. She took that as an invitation to speak and started nervously. "Thank you sir. You see, what I have to say concerns Miss Mary. She is a young lady now and a young lady at her age needs to have certain accomplishments. The girl has no one to teach her to read or do sewing. The only people she has met are you and me and she needs to be taught."

"Then you cannot teach her?" I said angrily. "That is what I hired you for!"

"Well, sir, I cannot read or write, sir, so I am afraid it is impossible." I gave her a hard look and considered. What use had I for an uneducated woman who was useless for the welfare of my daughter and cost precious money?

"You may leave my house tomorrow. I have no use for you." I replied coldly and was indifferent to her pleadings to stay.

The house changed drastically after she left. For the first time in my life I had to talk and communicate with my daughter and she was, I do not blame her, unresponsive. I tried to engage her in every possible way, but I am afraid that my lectures on plowing and soil bored her and she wished for the company of a

woman to talk to. I grew so desperate at her silence and moroseness that one day I decided to do what I never would have contemplated doing before. On a blustery Sunday morning towards the end of the winter I told Mary to put on her best dress and comb her hair. She looked surprised. "Why papa?"

"You will see soon enough," I said and went outside to bring in some water to wash up with.

With a light tread she went into her room and got ready. I washed myself also and put on the best clothing I had (much of which had holes because neither Mary nor I knew how to fix them.) Ten minutes later I called her out of her room and looking at her made my throat ache. "Why are you looking at me strangely, Papa? Am I alright?" I gruffly replied that she was.

We went to church that day. There was one only three miles from my farm and yet I never went since the death of my wife. I hated being around people because I believed they were judging me. I felt uneasy as we walked down the aisle of the church and sat in our pew. All eyes turned to us and I could see Mary's cheeks going red. After the service everyone went outdoors and our neighbors greeted us cautiously and politely. I noticed that Mary was quite the center of attention among the youth of the town and her eyes continued sparkling throughout the day. She had never had so much excitement in her whole life and she wanted more. "May we go again next week?" She asked me shyly that night. For some strange reason a selfishness and cruelty overtook me when she asked that question and I vowed never to take her there again and I did not.

The first time Mary or I even had contact with another person occurred when she was eighteen. I, as usual, was about my work in the barn and she, I assume, was doing her daily chores in the house. I heard my name being called and stepped out of the barn to see what was the matter. Mary rarely called me. Imagine my astonishment to see a woman, almost the exact replica of my wife standing outside the house talking animatedly to my daughter.

Mary started when she saw me and said, "Papa this is my aunt and she came to see me! She has a question to ask you."

The woman smiled. "You may be surprised to see me here." she said, "I am your late wife's sister. Before she died, she sent me a letter telling me that if anything happened to her, I must look after her daughter. After not getting a letter after that one, I assumed everything was fine, but recently I found out that she had died. I came straight over here and I must beg you to let me take Mary with me. I am shocked to see how little communication she has had with anyone. Living in this desolate place must be a terribly hard fate for such a pretty, young girl like her. Sir, I beg you to let me take her to my place where she can live a decent life."

Reader, I did not let her go. A strange mania had overtaken me in not letting her get satisfaction from anyone but me. I suppose I was selfish and was terrified to be alone on my own farm, on the desolate moors. Mary cried when her aunt left, but she soon resumed her ordinary life and time rolled on. She soon passed the age of twenty. A thought passed my mind that most girls were married by her age, but I brushed the thought away and contented myself with thinking that my daughter had no desire to marry. I was so foolish that the thought that she had never been allowed even to see young people her age had not even entered my head. I lived in a state of constant guilt and mental turmoil. I was too selfish to give my daughter away and too soft to not let it bother me.

My nemesis came. It is what the reader has been waiting for and I must write it though it hurts me. It happened on a rainy night in late spring when Mary was twenty two years old. I dreamed that night. I never had a dream like it before or since. In my dream the wind howled, and I was outside, trying to get in the house, but the house was shrinking before my eyes and Mary was inside. "It's choking me!" She screamed and my heart stopped, terrified. I yelled that I would save her, but just as I almost opened the door, the house and my Mary vanished from sight and only I was left all alone in the middle of a vast and endless land with no light. I jumped out of my bed, heart pounding. I knew then what I had to do. I must tell Mary to forgive me. Tell her that she could live her life now. I knew that I could never rest until I had talked to her. I ran to Mary's room and went to the bed. "Mary I must tell you something!" I said shaking the shape on the bed. The shape was just the bed clothing and nothing else. I searched for her everywhere in the surrounding area and there was no Mary. Some in the area say they saw her running away with someone in the night and others say she drowned. Maybe she went away with her aunt who promised her a better life than I did. All I hope is that she is happy now and has forgiven me, though I know I don't deserve it. I am no better than a murderer.