# Love Story

Their father was decrepit and that was just the start. His head was a veined dome, his ears purplish, his eyes small in a thickened face. His gut was an impossible balloon over his down-slanting belt. His mouth was a red slash.

He made them crazy. “*Absolutely* crazy,” his daughter and two sons said to their friends, who were many and sympathetic. He did not take his medications. He did not answer the telephone except when it suited him. He did not collect messages from the answering machine they bought him, ever. Bad enough they had to phone to hear his demands but when they had to phone eight times to hear his demands, when he rose from his throne at last to answer the telephone and behind his “The trouble with you is” was the roar of the toilet, then, as they told the sympathetic friends, it was *almost too much.*

Filial warmth was possible in his absence. In his presence it dropped away cleanly. There were, after all, horrors that could be visited upon a man: oppressions; abuses; privations; traumatic childhoods. But Milton had endured none of these, or if he had he had never breathed a word, even to their mother—and the daughter was certain the mother would have confided such extenuating circumstances, for the mother had once, in the long ago days before her death, lowered her librarian’s spectacles, sighed softly at the dark windowpane, and told the daughter men were *terra incognita*.

It seemed considerate of one’s children to be explicable if not pleasant. Had Milton confessed to some trauma they would have had the satisfaction of a mechanism. But Milton gave no hints. He had always been mean; he was meaner now that he’d had a stroke; he called them lazy and ignorant; he called them untalented even in the face of framed diplomas and lordly salaries. He called the younger son *selfish* while the son, white cuffs rolled above the smooth heavy links of his wristwatch, washed Milton’s food-crusted dishes.

A meeting was convened. The three, along with spouses, spent a restive hour in a coffee shop, polite because it was their way to be polite even where they did not get along (the older brother found the younger brother’s friends trivial, the sister thought the older brother’s politics coarse, and no one entirely approved of anyone’s spouse). After an efficient show of guilt it was decided: a woman would be hired. The daughter half-heartedly protested this assumption that it would be a woman, this only furthering the stereotype that women could be expected to do the jobs no one else wanted; she for one was sick of disposing of litter left behind by her male partners after lunch meetings. But when the older brother raised the specter of a male helper—a loner eager for the job, whose perverse abuses would become their mess to set right--she subsided.

The daughter’s husband, who during this discussion had minutely examined a sugar packet, glanced up inscrutably at everyone but his wife and told a joke about feminists.

A woman was sent by the agency. She was no more than five feet tall, olive-skinned and pock-marked, buck-toothed and plump-cheeked. The brothers bet on whether she would last one week or two but the daughter held out for a month: Milton must be capable of occasional charm with women, else how could their mother have agreed?

The woman, whose name was Dorothy, stayed a month and showed no signs of flagging. She persevered through winter, cooped up five hours a day with Milton while the snow blanketed the city outside the apartment’s windows. She jumped when Milton said to; laundered his graying underclothes; read aloud to him from the newspaper, repeating paragraphs five or six times as requested.

The children dropped in unannounced, out of protectiveness (of Dorothy—or, more precisely, of their investment in her); then out of curiosity. Dorothy endured Milton’s tutelage in gin rummy. She seemed unruffled when he tore cards out of her fingers, instructed her on their deployment, and pushed them roughly back across the table for her to gather and fan in her childishly clumsy hands. She taught him Go Fish. The sons and the daughter could not remember when Milton had allowed himself to be taught anything. Most shockingly, she began, in the fourth month, to tease him. “I’m cooking us some nice lunch,” she said. “Now you’ll just have to wait until it’s ready, and the ruder you are the slower I’ll go.”

Milton followed her progress around his old-man’s apartment with hungry eyes.

In the spring she requested permission to take him to a concert in the park. An outing! On her own time! What might motivate her?

The children were curious with a curiosity that was part competition. The daughter set out to acquaint herself with Dorothy, and after three interminable coffees, and a skein of incredulous commentary to the sympathetic friends concerning *the dullest person on the planet*, emerged triumphant, kernel of information in hand: Dorothy’s late husband, a law student whom Dorothy had married in the blush of youth, the morose elder son of her parents’ closest friends, had committed suicide not two years into the marriage. Dorothy had undergone heartbreak. “I had heartbreak ,” Dorothy said, stirring cream placidly into her coffee. She seemed unconscious of any need to elaborate, and the daughter, who had after all some sense of grace, did not persist. For a time following this confession the daughter empathized energetically with Dorothy. “How could a person ever get over that sense of failure?” she challenged the others. A spouse committing suicide. The children and their spouses tried, for a quiet moment, to imagine it.

“If *I* had to live with her for two years…” began the elder son,and the others shushed him with wicked smiles.

Dorothy went out with men, she confessed to the daughter, but rarely more than two or three times. Sometimes she brought a date to meet Milton. He disapproved.

The way Dorothy teased Milton was—wasn’t it?—flirtatious. Milton never ceased insulting her: she was dull, she would never read the news if he didn’t direct her to, her cooking was terrible, she’d arrived nine minutes late. Yet he seemed energized and calmer. The children’s burden, in turn, was lightened. At times he even neglected to criticize them. Wasn’t this what they’d hoped for?

After the next stroke she moved in. The doctor prescribed medications, exercises, and leg massages for circulation. Dorothy pestered Milton until he extended the thick fingertips of one hand and reached toward his toes, huffing rhythmically, steadying himself with his other hand on his kitchen counter. She bought scented lotion. *Your father likes mint-strawberry*, she told the children, who found reasons to leave the apartment when it was time for Milton’s massages. Once as the door swung shut the younger son heard his father—his father!—giggle.

Eventually the suspicion was voiced. The children were not the sort whose wants could be satisfied by something so vulgar as cash—their desires were more ephemeral, their victories or losses scored in words and influence rather than dollar signs. They were, in short, high-minded, and not the sort to accuse others of swindling. Yet it had to be said: Dorothy was after Milton’s money. Why else would a woman embrace such a man? Milton was not wealthy but a penny’s a pound to a pauper . And Dorothy was forty-one, which was not old but also not young, and—even the daughter had to admit—childless women at this age turned an eye to their prospects. It stood to reason.

In the coffee shop the children passed this conclusion between them, testing it gingerly like a beverage too hot to drink. Then the younger son’s wife drank. “Well,” she said, setting a warm palm firmly atop her husband’s motionless hand, “don’t you think she deserves the money?”

No friends attended the funeral. The gathering was limited to the children, their spouses, Milton’s two infant grandsons, and Dorothy, whose reddened eyes were almost handsome against her primly buttoned black dress. That afternoon the attorney informed the children, with an admirably blank expression, that the house and funds had been left to Dorothy. The children received nothing.

They sorted his possessions. Dorothy volunteered to do it but the children were unanimous in their refusal: This was, after all, the apartment where they had grown up. They were, after all, now orphans. The three knelt on worn cushions and, complaining of balky knees, bent brown-gray heads together over the shoeboxed remains of their gradeschool careers. By turns prickly and obliging, they took shifts sifting the slim leavings of their parents’ lives. In their father’s dresser-drawer the younger son found a loose stack of unfolded pages dense with a plump handwriting he recognized from Dorothy’s grocery lists. After reading aloud the salutation the son could not bear to continue so handed them to his wife, who read half the small sheaf before handing them back with a rueful laugh and the report that Dorothy’s letters were chock-full of impetuous vows and misspelled poems. The wife had stopped reading at the poem that ended *I tern up all my flowers in your hands.* The son sneaked the pages into Dorothy’s dresser and left them there.

Thereafter Dorothy was a fixture at family events. “Mother would have thought it was the charitable thing to do,” the daughter said with a practiced grimace, and the sons could not dispute this. Dorothy’s black-clad figure--for she now wore nothing but widow’s weeds--became so familiar as to be almost invisible. The generic birthday gifts she sent the grandchildren were the subject of dark jokes; her fat-scripted holiday cards were read aloud over breakfast tables and subjected to pointed editorializing. “We never married,” she liked to confess to the children’s sympathetic friends after a glass of eggnog. “But we had true love.”

The children agreed that the mystery of such a love, if it had been a love, was one they didn’t care to learn.

And yet. And yet. Years passed and the children’s gray hair encroached past the point of resisting; the elder son’s second wife enrolled him in golf class with an eye toward retirement; the daughter recognized that she was no longer glanced at on the street. Milton’s two grandsons showed signs of independence, then defiance.

After most of the Christmas guests were gone the younger son leaned forward, sliding one palm along the crease of his dark trousers, his amber drink sloshing tightly against the curve of his glass.

“Confess,” he said. “What was the story with you and Dad?”

“What do you mean?” Dorothy said, undisturbed. Her cheeks were rosy and capillary-dusted. She cuddled her drink to her breast.

“You’re supposed to give me the wisdom of true love now,” he said. “That’s how the script goes.” He spoke with flagrant scorn and self-conscious despair and his sister, whose suburban house this was, spoke his name pointedly, but Dorothy did not seem perturbed. She only looked at the son mildly, so he thought of a mute and maltreated animal awaiting its next inevitable ordeal. He had long since concluded that Dorothy was no schemer. She turned to him regularly now for financial advice-- too dim to understand he might resent it, just as she had been too dim to understand there were better choices in the world than an ugly old man. Odd though it seemed, he didn’t resent her financial consultations. Nor the fact that she slept every night in his childhood home. What insulted him was that she, having free will, had chosen a burden he would have abandoned given the choice.

Dorothy thought long before answering. Even before she’d spoken the son was inflamed by her gravity: as though her advice mattered a whit! As though she could presume to stand in the stead of his long-gone mother! As Dorothy contemplated the son’s mind offered up a pleasurable string of disparagements--disparagements such as he had not generated since the days when he had on principle preferred every woman to his wife; when he had privately enumerated his wife’s flaws, silently mocking her ideas about politics and art, though he’d never been crass enough to voice these sentiments. He had indulged these thoughts thinking they did not matter; thinking the nature of marriage was to unravel only to ravel again with the right reconstituting gesture or word. He had not imagined his wife—she with the shining, sentimental gaze--capable of raising the subject of divorce.

Dorothy spoke. “Your father liked what I had. I liked what he had,” she said. “We pleased each other.”

Before the son—who was by now quite drunk--could skewer her with a lascivious interpretation, she continued. “A woman must always try to please a man. For example mashed potatoes pleased your father. And turning on certain television shows on time.”

She blinked at him and waited for his reply. But the prospect of verbally trouncing her had lost its shine. There could be no glory in once and for all exposing her backwardness: this pitiable, indiscriminate soul who would embrace whatever she stumbled across; this woman born to be abused. He downed his drink and stared into the fire.

Later the sister and brother chided him for his cruelty and packed up leftovers for his refrigerator. He donned his overcoat and they dropped him at the train and half an hour later he was marching through the moody wet night and fresh caking snow.

But when he swung open the door of his dark apartment and reached for the light switch it was with the quiet tick of a thought: She had loved the world. Why hadn’t he?