

The Love of Good Women

That Sunday, Marta came to work in her daughter's 'engagement' dress. Joan saw her at the top of the lane, the red dress vibrant against grey picket fences and the dense, dark rain clouds banked high above the karri. She let the frying pan she was scrubbing slide back into the tepid water and turned to Sheila.

'Come and look at this - quick.'

Sheila rushed over to the sink, a half-peeled potato in hand. She stood on tip-toes to get a good view out of the window.

'Marta— wearing Krystyna's dress!'

The wind caught the hem of the dress, and it billowed upwards. Marta deflated the ballooning skirt with her hands, held it in place, palms tight against her thighs.

'Marta shouldn't have let Krystyna go out with Frank to start with.' Joan lifted the pan out of the water. 'Krystyna being so much younger than him and all.'

'How could Marta stop her? Krystyna was nineteen—and working.'

Joan stared at the tracery of egg white at the bottom of the pan.

'Well, the way Marta's been acting lately— ' Joan grabbed a knife and started to scrape the pan. 'You'd think she was the one who'd been dropped.'

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As Marta stepped into the boarding house kitchen, sheets of rain lashed the edge of the veranda.

'Morning, Marta,' Joan called out. 'Lucky—you just made it.'

'Morning, Joan. Ooh, the wind. It whoosh all of a sudden. I run last hundred yards, otherwise get wet.'

Marta hung her bag behind the door and walked over to Joan, folded apron in hand.

She nodded in Sheila's direction and called out, 'Morning, Sheila.'

Sheila waved a potato and smiled.

Joan watched as Marta shook out the apron, put it on over her dress and wrapped the apron strings tightly around her waist, tying a bow at the front.

Marta pressed her hands down the front of the apron, smoothing out the creases. 'I know what you think, Joan. Why Marta wear *that* dress? Today?'

'Look, I'm just glad you didn't get wet—it's such a beautiful dress.'

'Beautiful, yes.' Marta lifted her apron to show off the A-line skirt. 'Cost a lot, too. But Krystyna never wear it now.'

'Things will work out for Krystyna, you'll see.' Joan put her hand on Marta's shoulder.

'After Krystyna find out Frank chase that woman, she shout to me to chuck dress out. I pack it in box and take to bin. Could not throw away. I hide it in wardrobe instead, cry a long time. But other day I think, Krystyna, she not here any more, why waste good dress. I wear it to work.'

'Sensible idea.' Joan squeezed Marta's shoulder. 'But I hope you've brought a cardigan. You might need it later in the day with this weather.'

'I have in bag.'

'Good. Well I'm sure there'll be a full house for lunch today, so we'd better get started. You OK to do the sweets, Marta? It's our Sunday special, apple dumplings.'

'Yes. I start now.'

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Rain washed across the tin roof, overflowed from gutters and gurgled into tanks. The kitchen had darkened as though it were late afternoon. Joan turned on the lights as she

walked across the kitchen to stoke the stoves. The ovens needed to be hot for the legs of lamb, potatoes and pumpkin. Then she joined Sheila who was preparing the vegetables. As they shelled peas, Joan occasionally glanced in Marta's direction. Until Krystyna's departure for the city last month, Marta was always very methodical, tackling each task with concentration and energy.

'I learn on farm in Germany in war. Soldiers come, take me away to farm. I never see mother, father, sisters and brothers again,' she'd told Joan when she first came to work in the kitchen.

Joan was relieved to see Marta setting the ingredients out on the table with something of her usual precision and speed—the Granny Smith apples and a peeling knife on the left; the flour canister, a mixing bowl containing a golden ball of pastry prepared the night before and a tin of golden syrup on the right; at the top of the table, a pat of butter, the rolling pin and two large baking trays.

The 'old' Marta was finally back, she thought. The one who, when her husband, Stefan, had been crushed by the karri he was felling, had presented herself for work two days after the funeral.

'I stay home do nothing, I go mad, do something terrible,' she had said. 'Better I work.' And after gulping down the tea Joan had insisted on making for her, she had headed off to the storeroom to collect brooms, polish and the polisher.

When Krystyna left, it seemed that Marta had tried again to scrub and polish away her loss. But Joan couldn't help noticing how often she stopped mid-task and stood staring into space as though she had lost her way and was looking for a familiar landmark.

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Marta held each apple in her palm, pierced the shiny skin and skilfully sliced it away from the juicy white flesh in one long green spiral. When all the apples were peeled, Marta pushed the green ribbons to one side, cut each apple in half and cored them. Next she floured the tabletop, tipped the ball of pastry from the mixing bowl on to the flour, kneaded it briskly for a couple of minutes then cut it into thirds. Each third was rolled out into large golden sheets and that were cut into squares. The apple halves were wrapped snugly in a pastry square and placed in a row in the pie dishes.

Marta stood back, checked the rows of dumplings in each dish to make sure they were in line before pouring a generous glaze of golden syrup was over them. After gently shaking each tray to make sure the syrup spread evenly, Marta carried the trays to the stove. Burning wood glowed red-gold through the vents of the stove door and rush of heat hit her face when she opened the oven doors and pushed the trays inside. On the way back to the table, she rested a hot cheek against the coolness of the rain-smearred window and saw the bushes in the garden being flailed by wind and hail.

Usually, she cleared the table straight away and wiped it clean. But today her temples throbbed, her eyes felt grainy and she was weary. Her watch said ten thirty. She had time to sit down, take a quick break. She closed her eyes and thought about the first time she met Frank. It was a couple of months after Stefan's death when he walked into the dining room. He stood out immediately. It wasn't just his Dean Martin good looks and smile; he was above average height, and there was confidence in the way he held himself, the way he wore his clothes. He looked special, even in work overalls.

He was the first boarder she'd become friendly with. Frank had a talent for drawing people into conversation and making them laugh. He always had a smile for each of them— her, Joan and Sheila; and, later, Krystyna, of course. And praise for

something about the meal: the freshness of the beans, the smoothness of the gravy, the silkiness of the custard. Marta had blushed the first time he'd complimented her. But in no time they were exchanging tips about how to improve a dish, the local team's best player at the last football match, the prettiest dress at the last dance. Marta found that she began to wait for him to arrive for meals. They all waited for him, Marta thought. Even Joan, although she pretended not to.

When Marta was on evening shift, Krystyna came to the boarding house for dinner, then stayed on to help with the preparation for the next morning. That's how she met Frank.

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Marta kneaded her temples with her fingers, digging her nails more deeply into the skin with each stroke. Of course it would have been better if Krystyna had become involved with someone closer to her own age. Everyone knew Frank was thirty-eight; he'd celebrated his birthday soon after arriving by shouting evening drinks for everyone at the Club. There were younger men, but they were only interested in sport and booze. Marta knew Joan thought she should forbid Krystyna from going out with him. But didn't want to make Frank even more desirable by putting him out of bounds. Anyway, it would have been hard for her to pretend she didn't like him or disguise the pleasure she felt at seeing him make Krystyna so happy. Her daughter had lost her father. Maybe an older man was what she needed. Then came the 'friendship' ring from Frank.

Not long after, they saw the red dress in the window of *Maxine's Frock Salon*. Marta knew straight away that the dress would look even more striking on her daughter than on the mannequin. She insisted Krystyna try it on and when she saw her daughter's reflection in the mirror, Marta decided to buy it for her, whatever the cost.

‘You can wear it at your engagement party,’ she whispered.

Krystyna wasn’t sure. She wanted to wait. It might be unlucky to buy it before Frank made a more definite move.

‘I should have listened to Krystyna,’ Marta muttered, shaking her head as she stood up. She picked up the peeling knife, held it tight in her fist, poised above the mixing bowl.

‘Marta, are you alright?’ Joan was at her elbow.

‘Yes, yes, Joan. I silly woman, talk to myself.’ She let the knife clatter into the bowl.

‘Can I get you something— a cup of tea?’

You think cup of tea fix anything, Marta felt like shouting at her.

Instead, she pointed to the table and muttered, ‘Must clean up now.’ Then bent forward and with a deft movement of her hand swept the green spirals of apple skin into her apron.

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From what Marta told Joan after the breakup, Krystyna was hoping Frank would propose. Giving her the friendship ring, he’d whispered, ‘The real one is coming soon.’ He’d told Krystyna he was waiting for the Christmas bonus. With that, he’d have enough money for the ring. But when Christmas came, he changed his story. Said his mother was sick, and he’d have to send her some of his savings. But he’d make up the amount by the end of February.

But soon after New Year, while waiting to be served in the co-op, Marta noticed a petite, grey-haired woman glance at her a couple of times with an air of concern. She seemed familiar, so she nodded in acknowledgement. When she headed for the exit, the woman followed her.

Outside, the woman held out her hand and introduced herself as Mrs Bell. She'd met Marta at one of Joan's afternoon teas, she said. Her property was on the edge of the town, before the turn-off on the main road. She took in the town's lady teachers as boarders.

Marta shook her hand. She'd heard of Mrs Bell, but couldn't remember meeting her.

'Krystyna's your daughter, right?' Mrs Bell had asked. 'And her boyfriend is Frank?'

Marta nodded twice, perplexed at Mrs Bell's questions.

'There's something I think you and your daughter should know about Frank.'

Marta frowned.

'He's been seeing one of my teachers.'

'Frank. Seeing a teacher. Why? What her name?'

'I won't name her. Why? All I can say is that he picks her up early in the evening once, sometimes twice a week. I don't know where they go, but when they come back, he parks the car some way from the house, and they sit in it, windows closed, headlights switched off. They stay there for a long time before he drives off. This has been going on for a few months, at least.'

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There wasn't a single empty place in the dining room when they started serving lunch, a little after midday. Halfway through the meal, the rain stopped, the sun shone through the clouds and out in the garden, wet foliage glistened. Joan had been too busy ladling soup, dishing out meat and vegetables or spooning dumplings into bowls to notice Frank. In fact, she didn't become aware he was there until the dining room began to empty.

‘That can’t be right,’ Joan heard him say. ‘The Tigers were behind in the last quarter, but they couldn’t have lost by that much.’ He was talking to Sheila, who was clearing the table next to his. They were arguing over the results of one of the previous day’s football games.

‘I’ll check in the *Sunday Times*,’ Sheila said as she carried a tray of cruets back the kitchen. Frank followed her.

‘Here it is!’ Sheila’s finger pointed to the bottom of the page. ‘Final score: Swans 105 points, Tigers 62 points.’

‘Can’t argue with that.’ Frank was behind Sheila, peering over her shoulder at the results page. ‘God, who would have thought they’d end so badly.’

He turned to go back into the dining room and saw Marta standing by the cutlery drawer near the servery, staring at him.

Frank nodded. ‘Hello, Marta.’

Marta immediately dropped her gaze and began tugging at the drawer.

Joan, who was carrying a very large stockpot from the sink to the stove, tried to signal to Sheila to get Frank out of the kitchen. But Frank was beside her before she knew it.

‘Here, let me help,’ he said, taking the pot out of her hands and heading towards the end of the stove nearest the servery.

‘Not there! Down the other end,’ Joan called to Frank.

As Frank turned, Joan saw Marta take a large carving knife from the drawer and raise it in the air as she moved towards him.

‘No, Marta! No!’ Joan yelled.

Lightning zig-zagged across the sky and lit the kitchen with a lurid flash. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

(2355 words)