

Three Sarahs

By

Patricia Schultheis

A bright spring afternoon. Your father and brother Evan busy with two heifers in the calving barn, so you're alone with your mother. Her pill's plunged her into deep sleep, leaving you nothing to do except wash the latest load of her soiled sheets. Then, the thought hits like a kick: that Chinese laundry on Market Street . . . that place should be able to get her sheets soft. Scratchy bedding is the one complaint your mother allows herself. Her hair and breasts gone since January, and, now, March, all hope, too.

Yet, she bemoans the roughness of her sheets. "They shred my skin right off, Sally. It's the water . . . this hard well water makes everything rough."

So, you stuff the filthy heap into a burlap sack and drive to downtown York. You're only fifteen, no license, but what the hell, you've been driving one piece of farm equipment or another since you were ten. Plus, on the sly, Evan has taught you to handle the truck. But only on the farm. Still, you manage to get to the center of York without any trouble, only to meet disaster as soon as you open the door to Same Day Hand Wash. There, behind the counter, stands that brainy kid Wang, from Algebra II.

He takes one look at you, never says a word, darts into the back, and yells, "Ma!" A little Chinese woman comes out, smelling like garlic and wiping her mouth. Jason Wang stays in back and you wish he wouldn't because you don't know how much his mother understands as you explain that your own mother is desperately sick, that she needs soft sheets, that you need a quick turn-around. Wang's mother is still nodding "Yes" as you leave with no idea if she understood a word.

Back home, your father slaps you. Not because you drove the truck into York without a license, but because you'd left your mother alone. Never mind, that she hadn't woken up. Never mind that you knew she wouldn't—those pills are powerful. Never mind that you, her only daughter, haven't had nearly enough time to learn all that a mother is supposed to teach a daughter.

On Monday, Wang finds you in the cafeteria. "I have your laundry in my car." Out in the parking lot, you ask him how much. He shrugs, "Ten dollars?" You tell him you don't have that much, that you'll bring it tomorrow. "Okay." The sheets are wrapped in brown paper. You start back toward the school. Wang calls, "Sally?"

"What?"

"My mother says that if you need any more washed, you can give them to me." And so, every other day, you wait for the school bus with Tommy Mueller from one farm over and a burlap bag of sheets smelling of your mother's dying between you. Later, in the parking lot, you get another brown paper package from Wang and pay him ten dollars—it's money you've

filched from the fruit stand your father sets up in that old roadside shack. The arrangement with Wang doesn't go on for long . . . maybe five weeks. And then your mother's gone.

You are the one to decide that your mother should wear her wig for the viewing—details like that are beyond your father and Evan, who spend most of their time in the calving barn. After the funeral you realize nothing has prepared you for the emptiness separating you from everyone, everything else. Everything moves in slow motion. Even words travel from someone's lips to your ear like they ride sound waves stretching from the outer limits of space.

At school near the end of May, Wang reminds you that he still has your final load of sheets in his car. You follow him out to the lot, pay him ten dollars and take the last brown bundle. You're going back into the building, when the door swings open and Ben Harding comes out.

You know Ben Harding. Everyone knows Ben Harding. Captain of the football team, member of the jazz ensemble, grade A flirt . . . that Ben Harding. He holds the door and says "Whoa, whoa, what have we here?" as you pass through carrying the last clean sheets of your mother. Later, you will carry them onto the school bus, up the drive, through the house and into your bedroom, where you will wrap your arms around them and cry because you didn't have a quick, flirty retort for Ben Harding.

And then you'll hear your father down in the kitchen slamming pots, his way of letting you know to begin supper. So, you'll stuff your mother's last sheets deep into the back of your closet and never think of the price Jason Wang paid as York Pennsylvania's living cliché: the brainy Chinese kid whose parents run a laundry. You never think of how mortified he must have been that Saturday you came in with that burlap sack. Or how rare it was that you and he, both just teenagers, understood the sack contained something too intimate for words. Instead, you will dangle yourself in front of poor Tommy Mueller and start running wild with Ben Harding—your father too broken to notice you're making a fool of yourself.

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She looks just like you, Sarah. Always did—I remember Dot Mueller remarking on that the first time Dot seen her. But you know genes have a funny way of surfacin', and I always watched for some of mine to show through, maybe fill in her dimple a bit or bleach away some freckles. But too late for that now. She's you to stay. And that's the problem. Rips my heart out. I'll be on the tractor and she'll be climbin' the road from the school bus. And the wind catches her hair, turns it wild, like it did yours, Sarah. I'd be sittin' there and think how in all this surrounding aliveness, all the heifers and calves, and birds and sky, how is it my wife's hair the most alive thing I see? I never told you I had them thoughts, Sarah. But I did.

Even when the chemo took it, I'd think to myself, my Sarah's hair's still alive. It's in Sally's scalp, now, but still alive. Like those bulbs you planted near the backdoor every fall so you could have daffodils easy to pick come spring. Remember, Sarah?

Pure and simple what's between her and me is that I can't stand to look at her. Can't stand for her not to be you. There I said it. Worse, she's my own daughter and missin' you every

bit as bad as me and Evan. I think that's what's driven her to that Harding kid. I know that Tommy Mueller is nuts for her, but where does she throw herself? At that hell-in-a-hand-basket Harding kid. Ain't no use tellin' her otherwise—she may look like you, but she thinks like me.

Stubborn as a bull. Evan wasn't near as bad as she is that way. I can't tell you what a knot this has got me in, Sarah. So bad, I can't think my way out of a gunny sack. I see her pain, but I can't do nothin' about it. Just like I see Evan's and can't do nothin' about that neither. It's like we're each pullin' our own private sledge of rocks.

Why'd you go, Sarah? I think that's what's eatin' us. Why you and not someone else, like that Nosey Parker, Dot Mueller? It's eatin' us alive .

###

You and Ben Hardy had started slow; if Ben taught you anything, it's to start slow but never give up . . . three months first of tongue, then of breasts and wet desire before Ben got you where he wanted you. Now he's gone, reported to Penn State football, and you face nothing but interminable afternoons in this little shed, selling your father's produce and playing the long game 'til your father comes round.

Just a few bottles of hand lotion next to the peaches, body lotion near the tomatoes, soaps by the register. The lotions, you get from a stay-at-home mom in Shrewsbury and the soap from an Amish woman in Lancaster. But they don't sell. And then Evan's girlfriend—she's studying marketing at York College—tells you to tie a little decorative green ribbon around the bottle necks and soaps “And put out testers.” So, you do, and sales pick up.

Then she tells you, “Talk to your customers, Sally. Make them feel like you're their friend.” But you're a doer, not a chit chatterer. And talking to strangers is hard. But, still, you try: “That cucumber lotion has a wonderful fresh scent, doesn't it? I put it on the inside of my wrist. Cools me down.”

The local farmwives don't even glance at the lotions. They just stop to check out the quality of your father's produce. But the women from the nearby McMansions do. You see them climbing out of their SUVs, looking stunned to find themselves in southern Pennsylvania with two or three toddlers in tow. As if they can't understand how the forking branches of their lives have led them to four-bedroom, three-and-a-half-bath houses on half acres of former farmland, where their silent husbands grill chicken breasts over artificial flames on feeble decks. Once school starts, you keep the stand open weekends, and by the end of September, it's not hard to smile and say, “Let me know how you like it,” as you hand over a bottle of scented body lotion with a little green ribbon tied around its neck.

###

I have lived in foreign countries. Some childhood places when I was an Army brat, I can talk about. Others, where the Agency sent me when I worked there, I can't. But none has ever felt as foreign as this place, a cartoon house in southern Pennsylvania decorated as someone's

imagined America. Outside, the huge red, white and blue star between the front, second-story windows; inside, the camo comforter covering what's obviously a little boy's bed.

Jude turns to the realtor. "Why are they selling?" Middle-aged, kitten heeled, the realtor's probably heard every possible reason to leave a house, but she still summons a sadness not entirely feigned. "Divorce."

Jude catches my eye. In a perverse way, divorce forms the bedrock of our marriage. His parents' when he was twelve, and my own parents', when I was eleven, my sister thirteen. So bad, my sister vowed she'd never marry. I did, too, until I met Jude.

He was in a different agency, so we devised a game when one of us was sent to a country we couldn't talk about. We called it Wine and Twenty Questions: Does your country border the Black Sea? Sip of wine. Do the people speak Surigaanon? Sip of wine. Does it have nuclear weapons? Sip of wine.

But, then, one night, I didn't want to play. Something had happened on my last trip, something that wasn't supposed to. And the game wasn't fun anymore. "I think we should get out," I told Jude. "If we don't do it now, we'll be in forever." I hadn't been with the Agency even six years: I thought my soul was still mine—foolish. Emerging felt like I'd landed on the other side of a black hole. A foreign land. Not so for Jude.

He found a job right away at a security firm. "Lots of potential" he told me.

The realtor has gone downstairs, and Jude calls me from down the hall. A little girl's room, no camo comforter here, just pink and fairy wings. Jude smiles: we both want a daughter. Someday, but not now. We join the realtor downstairs. She has the stats spread on the kitchen island. This is the fourteenth house we've been through, and I can tell Jude's weary. So am I. This house doesn't appeal any more than the others, but the search has worn us down.

At the backdoor I notice a rack of shoes. Boys' and girls' sneakers, a couple pairs of running shoes, a pair of Wellingtons splotched with bright daisies. I remark about those to the realtor. She tells me, "There's a great shoe department in Nordstrom. It's right down route 83. I'll bet they came from there."

I smile and don't tell her that I've shopped in the Grand Bazar of Istanbul, the flea markets of Paris, and the Souk in Marrakesh. She looks intelligent, but she probably wouldn't believe what I've seen. I scarcely believe it myself. I tell myself wearing Wellies splotched with daisies might not be so bad.

"I have a surprise for you." You and Ben Harding are in a mountainside A frame. He says a friend has lent it to him, but you suspect it's his crib. Flunked out of Penn State, and now apparently out of life, he's brought along a fifth of Captain Morgan and a six-pack. From the mattress on the floor he grins up at you. "Show me, Sally."

You're still wearing your shirt and jeans. "You first."

Ben whips off his own shirt and jeans, then everything—stoned and drunk he still can manage that with grace. “There,” he says, “now give me that damn surprise.”

You saunter back and forth at the foot of the mattress. “Sure you’re ready?” But Ben’s obviously ready—ever since you took up with him, Ben has never not been ready. You unbutton your shirt, turn from him, slip it off, then turn back. “Well?”

“Hot damn, Sally.”

You’re wearing a new camisole from your shop. Five years now you’ve kept it going, gradually expanding from lotions and soaps to a whole line of lingerie. Your camisoles are so popular, you keep a team of local women sewing them. Not gaudy mall-shop stock, everything in Milk Shed Sally’s is exquisitely suggestive. You look down at Ben. “You really like it?”

He takes a drink and pats the mattress. “Come here, let me see. I need a closer look.”

“There’s more.”

“I’ll bet there is.” Quick as a snake he’s off the mattress and at you, whipping off your jeans, touching you through the lacey panties. Then they and the camisole are on the floor and Ben Harding has you, has you where he’s always taken you, to a place tittering on the brink of oblivion.

Afterwards, when he’s asleep, you are cold—the A frame has only one miserable blanket. You slip into your camisole and panties, go into the bathroom, and wash your face. In the mirror you see your mother’s face searching back at you. After Ben flunked out of Penn State he “tried” the Navy, but something went wrong there, too. And now he’s been hanging around York for over a year, just staying in a job long enough to collect Unemployment once he’s fired. You know, have known, for some time that he’s too lost to make you happy, but he’s the only one who can take you back to sixteen. You throw on your shirt and jeans, wrap Ben’s jacket around you and take Captain Morgan out onto the deck. A full moon and stars. And somewhere in the night, a separated calf and cow bellow for each other.

###

I won’t lie, Sarah, hurts like hell. I been milkin’ cows since I was nine-years-old and damn if I don’t get kicked at seventy. Evan and that girl he says he’s gonna’ marry took me to the emergency . . . Sally was off messin’ with them fru-fru things she sells in that little shack by the road, so it had to be Evan and that girl of his to take me. Three ribs cracked, all bandaged up before Sally got there. Know what she calls that little shop of hers? Milk Shed Sally’s, that’s what. Now don’t that beat all? A perversion, what it is. A perversion of the true meaning. It’s almost like she’s thrown it in my face, takin one meanin’ and twistin’ it around to serve herself. Those fru-fru gewgaws she sells have about as much to do with a real milkshed as a cow pie has to do with a whip-crème dessert. I tell you one thing, Sarah, things keep up like they’re goin’, there won’t be any true milkshed left in this part of Pennsylvania.

Cracked ribs or not, that’s why I had Evan drive me to the auction today. Hurt like hell to climb the steps, but I had to see what Otts Mueller is gettin’ for his herd. Little by little he’s

been sellin' it off. He don't say so, but I know he is. I suspect Dot's put him up to it . . . wants to move down to Florida or wherever their Tommy lives.

I never told you, Sarah, but I used to watch Sally waitin' for the school bus with Tommy and think "You two . . . You two, if only you'd look at each other and see what I do." See how fine it could be . . . our farm, the Muellers' combined. Together, those farms wouldn't be enough to support a whole milkshed. But almost. Almost. Like most of my dreams, a fool's imagining.

If your passin' has taught me anything, Sarah, it's not to dream. No matter how hard you work, nothin'll come out like you counted. Freaks, that's what farmers are, nowadays. City people buyin' up these houses poppin' up everywhere like April dandelions. Like all these farms and all that goes along with them is a show for their amusement.

Take that couple comin' down the steps across the pen. Her in them fancy boots with the flowers and him helpin' her down—she's pregnant and can't see the steps. Bet they came to the auction 'cause they don't have anything better to do on a Saturday morn. Bet they got no idea what they're seein'. . . southern Pennsylvania's honest-to-God real milkshed vanishin' before their eyes.

And the end of Otts Mueller's life. I know they're not seein' that.

###

Jude and I live in separate worlds. He lives in a world of doing. And I live in a world of waiting. When I worked for the Agency, my world, too, was a world of doing, but it was doing carefully camouflaged as waiting. Waiting for a certain young man to emerge from a hovel in northern Mali. Or waiting to get past a roadblock in Burkina Faso. Or waiting to find out if my Peul contact in Mopti was still alive.

And then we moved here and waited until we were "ready" for a baby. And then waited to find out why I wasn't getting pregnant. And waited more for my "treatments" to work. Now I just wait. Wait for my baby to wake up so I'll have something to do. Then wait for her to go to sleep, so I won't.

And whatever I do or don't do, doesn't feel like real life. The pain of having her, now that was real. It blasted me into an all-consuming furnace where nothing existed but obliterating agony. Not Jude telling me to "Push, Krista, push!" not the nurse saying, "One more, just one more!" were as real as that willful, emerging life splitting me open.

And then, when I held Sarah, felt her warm heft, saw myself in her, I thought, Yes, this, too, is real. I can do this. But I was wrong. First, Sarah wouldn't nurse, then she didn't gain weight, and finally the doctor said it would be best to put her on formula. And with each passing day being her mother feels less real.

I remember those African women, a baby strapped to their backs, another one holding their hand, a basket of sweet potatoes balanced on their heads. How beautiful were their faces. How exquisitely impassive, as if they had learned to harness whatever energy having an

expression would cost. As if their horizons were not the far-off hills, but simply one step ahead. Then another. And another.

“Here, women play at purpose,” I told Jude last night. He didn’t understand. How could he? He lives in the world of doing. But here, so many women live as I do: by waiting. I hear them in the Walmart, talking about the upcoming soccer season, the lacrosse games, where they’ll sink into low foldup chairs and wait for their kids to play. I see them sitting in their SUVs at school dismissal time. Watch them at the library Story Hour.

The woman in Mali couldn’t afford to wait on the periphery of their child’s activity. What superhuman dignity and reserve they had. They were so busy simply enduring. Their lives were full of woe, but full. And real. I think I’ll call my sister in New York. Her job scarcely gives her time to breathe, but whenever I call she says she wants to come visit, so maybe this time she will.

And this afternoon when Sarah wakes up, I’ll take Jude’s shirts to the laundry on Market Street. The woman who runs it is from China, and I feel she’s like me. Both of us foreigners in this place. And maybe I’ll scout out that little lingerie shop . . . some place to take my sister if she comes.

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Late afternoon, early spring, an SUV pulls up. Two blonde women climb out in wordless synchronization. You assume they’re sisters—running your own shop has made you a keen observer of people—you know how to touch their sweet spots to make a sale. The driver wrestles a baby carrier from the back and sets it on the ground, and while she’s getting her handbag, the taller one makes googly eyes at the baby.

She’s the High Auntie . . . you know the High Auntie role. Since Evan got married and had a baby you play the High Auntie all the time. When the women come inside, High Auntie spots the silk camisoles right away, and doesn’t mind the sixty-dollar price. She holds a shell-pink one up to her chest. “They’re made by Amish women near Lancaster,” you tell her.

High Auntie laughs “Amish women! Making something like this! Well, I must say that certainly is interesting.” She has the same misconception that many nonlocals have about the Amish: that their austerity precludes active sex lives. The SUV has Pennsylvania plates, so the woman with the baby must be the sister who lives nearby. You watch her watch her sister. “It’s lovely,” High Auntie remarks about the camisole, “but I don’t know if it would fit me.” Her mouth gives rueful twist, but her hand flutters over her ample breasts with white-fingered pride.

You help her find one cut a little larger and looser. “This style’s been very popular. Try it on. It should But High Auntie and you know fit isn’t the real issue. Feel is. How the camisole will make her feel when she wears it. How she’ll feel to someone touching her through it.

The sister with the baby watches like an onlooker to a scene from her former life. Maybe she once lived in a time when she indulged in flirty camisoles. And maybe some part of her still remembers when her body gave and received pleasure. When it had some purpose other than

giving succor to the tiny forcefield asleep in the carrier at her feet. Her sister goes into the dressing room, and the one with the baby looks through the winter nighties. You've marked them down sixty percent, but, if she's like many of your customers, she won't buy. The risk is too great: maybe her husband will be too stressed-out to notice her in it. Or worse: maybe he'll get angry that she's spent the money when their McMansion's powder room has a leak and its deck is rotting.

Your mind drifts to what to make for dinner. Evan runs the farm alone, now, and he's too wrapped up with that and his own family to help with your father or anything else. Which means you'll have to make dinner, and then get your father fed and to bed, before you can get on the computer to order lace from Milan and silk from Singapore.

But, then, the woman with the baby rips through your thoughts. "How do you stand it?" she asks.

"Stand what?"

"Those cows, the way they bellow."

"I guess I don't notice it. Probably because I grew up here."

"I've never heard anything so heartbreaking."

"It's spring, calving season, that's all it is."

"I lived in India. They have cows there, too. Lots of them. But I don't remember this constant bawling."

"It's what cows do when they're separated from their calves."

"Then why separate them?"

"For the milk. This is a dairy farm." You're afraid she'll ask you what happens to the calves, how they're sold for veal, so you ask her the name of her baby.

She smiles and picks up the carrier. "Sarah. Her name is Sarah."

Her answer hits hard. You almost drop your smile. Her gray eyes sweep over your store. "So, are you Milk Shed Sally?"

Your smile still holds. "For the last twenty-five years." Again, her eyes sweep your shop.

"It's lovely . . . inviting."

"Thank you. That's what I was aiming for." You want to keep the conversation focused on your store, because the store is what you've made of your life in the ten years since your mother died. You don't want to look back to the time before that. You want to keep private what few people know: that you are Sarah, too. That Sarah is your christened name. But you've always been called Sally, because your mother was Sarah. Because your mother is the only Sarah

her remaining, tattered family has ever acknowledged. And now the Earth is once again orbiting into the time of her dying, sending you spinning into the season of loss.

High Auntie steps out of the dressing room, holding the camisole like a banner. “It fits great!” You show her matching tap pants and she buys those, too, plus a bottle of cucumber-scented lotion. The sister with the baby buys two packs of lilac sachet, and, while she fishes for her wallet, you smile down at her baby, who surprises you with a grin of unadulterated joy. As if she recognizes you. As if she’s been traveling through time and space while growing in her gray-eyed mother’s womb to arrive at this very moment and give you a toothless, joyful smile.

“Hi, there, Sarah,” you say. “Hi, there.” And Sarah kicks her feet and waves her hands, still grinning. “Well, look at you, Sarah. Look at you,” you say. And Sarah grabs a foot and raises it to her mouth. Her eyes lock onto yours. telegraphing, “Yes, look at me. I can suck my toes! Look at me!”

“She seems to like you,” her mother says and picks up the carrier. “Maybe in another life you were sisters, or will be in the next one . . . weird thinking like that, I guess that’s what comes from living in India.”

You tell her to come again and feel as though she will. Then, she and her sister leave, and you close the shop. Through the early springtime evening, you walk up the hill toward the house. The light in the birthing barn is on: Evan must be there. Up at the house, your father is alone in front of the television, his only entertainment since his stroke. You kiss the crown of his head, while resting a hand on his shoulder. He cannot walk or speak, but he has one good hand. And he uses it to pat yours. Later, that night when you’re putting him to bed, you will tell him about Baby Sarah, and how she surprised you by smiling and sucking her toes. His eyes will light up, and he will nod. And the smile on his slobbered lips will be so unfiltered that your heart will become as full as the early spring moon out his window. Later, still, you will take the package of sheets from the back of your closet and you will sit on your bedroom floor. For the first time in years, you will remember Jason Wang. And the moment when, across the high school parking lot, he called you “Sally”. You will hold the package of your mother’s clean sheets between your knees and listen to the cows calling for their calves.

A Baltimore writer, Patricia Schultheis is a regular contributor to the op-ed page of The Baltimore Sun and is the author of more than a hundred published articles, essays, reviews and short stories. Her fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in three dozen national and international literary journals, and has been anthologized with work by such outstanding authors as Alice McDermott and Annie Proulx. She is the author of *Baltimore’s Lexington Market*, a pictorial local history, published by Arcadia Publishing in 2007, and *of St. Bart’s Way*, an award-winning short story collection published by Washington Writers’ Publishing House in 2015. Her memoir, *A Balanced Life*, was published in September 2018, by All Things That Matter Press.