

SAFE HOUSE

by

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For Irene Worth, in memory.

There is no secret that they can hide from thee.
Ezekiel 28:3

I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundations of the world.
Matthew 14:35

Characters.

Henry. A government official.

Mary. Henry's wife.

Marta. A cultural attaché from somewhere in the Middle or Near East.

Setting

The contemporary world.

A living room, a bedroom, a study, several meeting places, somewhere unknown.

Scene

A living room. Henry, Mary and Marta.

HENRY

Well, it's been a good, safe place to raise a family. We've been happy with it, wouldn't you say? . . . Mary?

MARY

The gates are manned 24 hours.

MARTA

Twenty-four!

MARY

The hardest part is getting out.

MARTA

Really?

HENRY

What Mary means is. She's been kept pretty much at home. Raising six boys—

MARTA

Six?

HENRY

That's right. Six young men, now.

MARY

(ignoring him) If you don't belong. The guards'll hold you at the gate. 'Til someone comes to vouch for you.

MARTA

Perhaps they'll hold me here!

MARY

Safe inside. With us.

(They laugh.)

HENRY

You came with me. You're registered.

MARY

You're video-taped!

MARTA

Oh, dear!

HENRY

Nothing to fear.

MARY

I used to play a game with them.

HENRY

Mary—

MARTA

--And which was that?

MARY

I'd play like I was someone else.

MARTA

And how?

MARY

Oh. I'd give another name, a false address.

MARTA

They let you in?

MARY

Yes. Every time.

MARTA

So the system has its cracks.

HENRY

They know you, Mary, after sixteen years.

MARY

Nothing's secure. When you want to get through . . .

MARTA

You do.

MARY

You do.

(a pause)

How long will you be staying here?

MARTA

In the cultural field, that's never clear . . .

MARY

I hope for a while?

MARTA

Me, too. It's such a fascinating city.

MARY

The artistic life is wide and varied.

HENRY

(getting up) So . . . Mary?

MARY

Yes, dinner is ready.

(The women get up. They all start to move to another part of the house. Henry goes first.)

Marta?

MARTA

(stopping) Mary?

MARY

I'm so glad you came.

MARTA

Thank you! I am, too!

MARY

And I hope I'll see you again –

(HENRY comes back in to the room. They turn sharply to face him.)

(End of Scene)

Scene

Mary and Henry in bed. Henry is sleeping.

MARY

I've been thinking, Henry, about the cultural attaché.

(she looks at him, noting that he is fast asleep)

I think she might be dangerous.

For us, I mean.

We're a close-knit family unit. On secure financial footing. With good credit. We live in a beautiful house. And it's all paid up. And you work tirelessly for a government agency.

(she yawns)

Things are exactly the way they should be. And how they seem. We bow our heads at mealtime and say grace.

(End of scene)

Scene

A meeting place. Mary and Marta.

MARY

What does a cultural attaché do? Exactly?

MARTA

That's a good question. There are several answers. One is easy.

(They laugh.)

We bring our culture here to you. And send yours back.

(a pause)

But a culture is a funny thing. It can't really be grasped, in truth, from someone outside it. Oh, we cast our shadows back and forth. In blinding color. But my being here is politics. The art and dance of peace and war. It keeps things fluid between us.

MARY

Henry meets a lot of people. They all have functions. They keep coming, and they never stay for long. They speak our language with such different melodies, like a symphony of instruments.

MARTA

Hmm. What instrument am I?

MARY

You're . . . a harp.

MARTA

(laughing) I'm flattered.

I hear voices so differently. I hear murmurs and screams. Static and droning. When I choose to listen.

(MARY looks startled, MARTA smiles.)

MARTA (cont.)

Of course, I hear music, too. And poetry that transfuses me with joy and fire.

(pause)

My father was a poet. And my mother, she was a poet, too. And my grandfather was a poet. And his father before him. And both of my brothers are in the literary field. One, god forgive him, is a theatre critic. The other, a scholar of ancient texts. I have a sister –

MARY

A sister!

MARTA

She's my twin.

MARY

How wonderful that must have been.

MARTA

She was a poet, too. In spirit. But she's no longer . . .

(a pause)

She disappeared.

MARY

No . . .

MARTA

She was gentle, soft. She lived for her art. And her art, alone. She believed in beauty and found it everywhere. And the beauty of truth. She heard the world much like you.

MARY

What was her name?

MARTA

(a pause) Marta.

MARY

. . . Oh, I see!

(MARTA laughs.)

You *are* a poet. But you're something else as well. Maybe a painter? A pianist? But I don't think so. I think you're an actress.

MARTA

I *was* an actress.

MARY

I knew it! I knew . . .

MARTA

A very bad actress.

MARY

I don't believe that.

MARTA

It's sadly true.

MARY

You're . . . so charismatic. Expressive and mysterious—

MARTA

(laughing)--Stop, please stop!

MARY

You could be from anywhere.

MARTA

Anywhere?

MARY

(catching herself, embarrassed) Well, over *there*.

MARTA

And in between?

MARY

And all at once.

MARTA

Fleeing and wandering . . .

MARY

the four corners of the earth . . .

(a pause)

You could play any part.

MARTA

I studied with a famous Russian teacher in Paris. She had been an actress in Stanislavsky's company. She told me, "Marta, it's all very dramatic. But it won't do. You are acting for Hecuba."

MARY

'for Hecuba'?

MARTA

I was acting for the Gods. And not in the scene. Acting up a storm. Without any truth.

MARY

But acting isn't true. It's acting!

MARTA

Oh, no. On the contrary. The finest acting is completely truthful. The actor believes in what she is doing. While it is happening, of course. Completely.

MARY

(slowly) I played the mother's part for over half my life. But I never believed in it completely. The words I spoke seemed to come from somewhere else. Outside of me. It never felt completely real. Maybe life is only real on stage.

MARTA

What part would you most like to play?

MARY

Oh, that's a tough one. You see . . .

MARTA

Go on.

MARY

I never allowed myself the luxury. Of imagining another life.

MARTA

I don't believe that.

MARY

(slowly) Henry was sent abroad. Just recently. And with the boys gone, I went along. It was a whirlwind tour of the middle east, starting in Jerusalem. And then, further on, to Tajikstan, Ashgabat. And then Islamabad. Tehran and Bagdad. And in Mecca, our tour ended. And somewhere along that extraordinary route. My handbag was stolen. And among other things, both valuable and worthless, I lost my passport. And now, I often wonder about it. Someone stole it. And then someone must have bought it. And somewhere a woman is using my identity. She robbed me of it.

MARTA

Losing your identity is not such a tragedy.

MARY

I wonder where she went with it. And what she is doing. And who she was before she became me. And if she misses herself. I hope she embarked on a marvelous journey . . .

(pause)

and became exactly who she wanted to be

for both of us.

(pause)

I can't get over that we bumped into each other.

MARTA

Chance. Fate. Mystery.

MARY

I'll take all three.

MARTA

What time are you meeting Henry?

MARY

At four. Every Saturday . . .

MARTA

He meets you here?

MARY

Well, I like to shop. And so we've worked this out. He does errands of some sort. I don't ask what—

MARTA

No.

(They laugh.)

MARY

--and then he picks me up. Because I don't like driving in the city.

(a pause)

I shop. And then I stop in here. And wait for him.

MARTA

Every Saturday.

MARY

Without fail. You would find me.

If you wanted to.

(End of scene)

Scene

A meeting place. Marta and Henry.

MARTA

I need to thank you for arranging my trip.

HENRY

Only too happy to have been of help.

MARTA

And for clearing up the problems with the paperwork.

HENRY

Sometimes solutions are unorthodox.

MARTA

Coming into the country as your wife!

HENRY

Well, we want to help you make a new life.

(MARTA slides a passport across the table. HENRY takes it and slips it into his pocket.)

A fresh start.

MARTA

Start, yes.

HENRY

Without the burden of those secrets you keep.

(a pause.)

We'll take them.

(There is a pause. MARTA looks away, draws a sharp breath. She turns back to HENRY.)

MARTA

(lightly) Your wife is a lovely woman, by the way . . .

HENRY

She can talk your ear off about the boys. And the renovation of our kitchen.

MARTA

I look forward to meeting her again.

(a pause)

HENRY

She likes to shop in the city. But she doesn't like to drive. It scares her. So I take her in. And drop her off. And pick her up later at the museum. It's funny the people she bumps into there. You'd be surprised.

MARTA

(slowly) Well, when you sit still, the world comes to you.

HENRY

Maybe you could meet her there one day. I'm sure she would enjoy your company.

(a long pause)

HENRY (cont.)

There's a café in the courtyard. Whatever you order, you can't go wrong. But you have to make a decision. And fairly quickly. Because they do get busy. And if you miss the opportunity, they move on. And then there's no guarantee that there'll be anything left. People here are very hungry.

MARTA

Heat takes away the appetite.

HENRY

It's a matter of degree. You can see it two ways. It's a chance and there's no other choice.

(pause)

MARTA

One adjusts to the climate.

HENRY

That's more like it.

Although there are some poor suckers who never do. The heat kills them. They disappear in it. They just can't stick it. One fellow I knew died of a heart attack. A marathon runner! One woman got some rare tropical ailment. Well, that's why we have Antarctica, Siberia-- or Minnesota, for that matter. For people like that.

(He slides a card across the table to her.)

This place is a good safe bet. When it comes to what you're looking for.

(She takes it and slips it in her pocket.)

Why don't you call and make an appointment? The highways here can be problematic, but there are safer routes, depending on the weather. Some faster, some slower.

(End of scene)

Scene

Mary and Henry in bed. Henry is sleeping.

MARY

It's funny, Henry. I'm still dreaming peace-time things. As if there was. Being late to pick the kids up. Waiting at the wrong bus stop. I dreamed that one of our sons was homosexual. And I expect he is, don't you? They say one in ten are. Why not one in six? Then suddenly, I was holding the cultural attaché. In my arms! But then you woke me with one of your cries.

(HENRY cries out in his sleep, waking himself. MARY pretends to sleep. HENRY checks to see if she is sleeping and satisfied, gets out of bed. He dresses himself, always checking to make sure he is not disturbing her sleep. Then he goes out and closes the door behind him.)

There is no such thing as 9-5 in the life of an officer of the government. Terrorists work around the clock. He must be ready at any time. And he is sworn to secrecy. Even when it comes to his own family. The Oath of Office is a sacred trust.

(End of Scene)

Scene

A study. Henry, alone. He speaks into a sophisticated digital recorder. An innocuous package in a black plastic bag lies near him.

HENRY

Dear Friends. Your appreciation means the world to me. And I am sorry for the delay in my response. Age, they say, brings wisdom. It also brings new worries and a need for caution. Large bills associated with the renovation of our kitchen. Winds of change blowing through the Institution. I'm not sleeping as well as I might at night. But, please rest assured that you are not forgotten. You remain in my thoughts, as you will ascertain.

I've put together some materials over the course of several months. Some of it urgent. The rest I hope instructive.

Yours in friendship, . . .

(a pause)

Clark Kent.

(HENRY stops the recorder. He hits the rewind button and then plays the tape back, listening to his words. He stops the tape and removes the tiny digital tape and gently wraps it in a piece of newspaper. Then he slips a larger package in newspaper out of the plastic bag and inserts the tape into it. He closes the plastic bag and tapes it up. He dresses himself to go outside, then switches off the light, whistling innocuously. And leaves.)

(End of Scene)

Scene

Mary and Marta.

MARY

Sometimes I lose control.

MARTA

Oh?

MARY

I throw things . . .

MARTA

What things?

MARY

Soft things.

MARTA

Well, then.

MARY

Pillows, socks . . .

MARTA

Hardly counts.

MARY

And I scream.

MARTA

Not out loud!?

MARY

You know me already, I see. Silently. I scream to myself, and I say . . .

MARTA

What do you say?

MARY

Oh, terrible things . . .

MARTA

. . . Like?

MARY

“I hate you.” “I can’t stand the sight of you.” “I want to kill you.”

MARTA

Oh, you mean, the usual.

MARY

Have you ever felt like killing someone?

MARTA

Your question presupposes that I never have.

MARY

Have you ?!

MARTA

Not with my bare hands.

MARY

Oh, well then . . .

MARTA

(laughing) Of course not. Don't look so askance. Well, not *directly*. But we're all responsible for somebody's death. We're all implicated. And, yes.

MARY

Yes?

MARTA

I have wanted to kill someone.

MARY

It's hard to admit it.

MARTA

It's human. When you're trapped, you want to strike back.

MARY

He has his good sides. He plays the clown at children's parties. For family and colleagues. And at church outings.

MARTA

Astounding! And charming.

MARY

Yes. But I'm not happy I wish I knew the secret to happiness.

MARTA

'The secret to happiness . . . '

MARY

Go on.

MARTA

What a funny phrase that is. Because what is a secret?

MARY

I'm telling secrets now.

MARTA

Are they secrets, really?

MARY

I think so . . .

MARTA

But I knew them already. Your unhappiness is no secret, Mary.

(a pause)

The secret is . . . that there are no secrets. But then you knew that.

(pause)

A secret. Now, that would be a revelation that could change a world. But it's the same old world.

MARY

No secrets.

MARTA

We play like there are, of course. Because we can't bear --

MARY

--knowing

MARTA

what we know.

There's a children's game where I come from. It's played in a group and called 'Secret Post.' Someone tells a secret and passes it on. And it gets passed on from ear to ear. Until at the end of the line of children, the last one told it, tells it out loud. The secret is never what it started out to be. Most often, the opposite of what it was. But every child is sure that it wasn't to blame. He told what he heard. And so did she. Only one child knows what the secret is. But by the end of the game, none of the children care. Each stands by his own version. And when the secret holder tries to defend it, no one accepts her version of the truth.

MARY

Henry asked me how my day in town went. What I saw. Who I met. I didn't tell him I saw you.

MARTA

Oh. Why not?

MARY

It felt right.

MARTA

Will you tell him that we met today?

MARY

No. If you don't mind. I'd like to keep it . . .

MARTA

Secret?

(MARY nods, they laugh.)

All right.

(End of scene)

TO READ THE WHOLE PLAY AND FOR ANY OTHER INQUIRES,
PLEASE CONTACT info@lydiastryk.com

