

## Mr. or Mrs. Mulberry

Where exactly is this town? Likely somewhere in the middle of nowhere but certainly in the United States. When? Oh some time of old---does it matter? Mr. and Mrs. Mulberry were the finest couple in town—and, Mr. Mulberry, for as far as he could tell, was the luckiest man in town for having the best woman on the planet as his wife. Mrs. Mulberry was an attraction by herself – “the eighth wonder of the world” Mr. Mulberry called her on the night of their wedding and honeymoon. Mrs. Mulberry was the most beautiful woman in town. Even the blondes and red heads, including those possessing much younger youth, envied her jet black hair that draped along her fair-skinned face. To and from the market, window shopping on main street, or simply on a leisurely stroll, she stopped everyone in their tracks. Men removed their hats to gawk and stare. Cars stopped to a screeching halt so she may cross the streets. Mrs. Mulberry stood at a height of six feet. She towered over her husband who was barely all of five-foot-five. One would think Mr. Mulberry insecure for taking on a wife who always looked down on him, especially since being as short as he was and always being looked down upon by virtually everyone except children. Mr. Mulberry, however, had a great sense of humor and a great sense of humor he would need. When people inquired his feelings about having such a giant beauty on his arm, he’d laugh and simply say, “well, she does complete me now doesn’t she?” Mr. Mulberry afford a little humility. Literally. He was the richest man in town and all nearby lands of known. His father, knowing that little runt Mulberry will be needing a lot of money, built from the ground up a thriving grain business and the largest known farm around, and worked them to the bones in his hands. Mr. Mulberry inherited it all upon his parents’ sudden and premature death. The rest of his fortune came from smart investments and a few tight strings of good luck. Mr. Mulberry’s wealth was hard to disguise if he wanted to. Evidence of his ever-growing mound of wealth could be seen everyone from his large mansion that sat on the highest hill in town, to the gaudy diamonds that adorn Mrs. Mulberry’s neck and wrists, to his fleet of model-t cars, and, as he settled into the comfort of forty, around his waistline and chin too. Mr. Mulberry was in fact getting plump around the edges. But Mrs. Mulberry didn’t mind at all. She found his extra to be adorably cute. And every time she pinched his excess, he’d throw her more money to spend out on the town. Mr. Mulberry couldn’t possibly believe that the most stunning woman in town, arguably on the planet, genuinely loved him. For certain, he often pondered, if he had no money he’d be all alone. That if suddenly he went bankrupt, Mrs. Mulberry would vanish. But he’d be wrong. Mrs. Mulberry, although the topic never became the matter of real conversation, knew he was wrong. She truly loved him and what she loved most about him was all that made him imperfect, human. Her wonder was whether he would love her the same if she wasn’t so beautiful or even if her beauty was nothing more than a perception. Regardless, it satisfied Mr. Mulberry that to know that he was the envy of the town. With Mrs. Mulberry on his arm, their custom-made hats side-to-side, both snug in their European-imported suits and dresses, brimming with the finest touches of ingenuity, he pulled up his trousers with assured confidence as they walked together down the streets of the town they knew everything about and everyone within and everyone in turn knew them- the town they felt they might as well had owned. But not all the townspeople were so blinded by a large wallet on which a tiny man stood and the walking beauty of six feet by his side.

“Well hey there Mr. Mulberry” an old friend greeted as he emerged out of a town bar. “Some time it’s been, Joe” Mr. Mulberry replied. Mrs. Mulberry blushed uncomfortably as if he she knew her acknowledgment was next. For some reason, the usually friendly and sociable Mrs. Mulberry felt like she wanted to disappear. “Well Mr. Mulberry, this must be your beautiful wife I’ve been hearing so much about. “While it sure is, Joe.” Joe continued with his flattery. “And the word beautiful simply doesn’t do her justice” Joe said extending his hand out to Mrs. Mulberry while also getting a closer look at her face. “That’s a strong grip you have their Mrs. Mulberry.” “Oh, well thank you. I do my fair share of work in the kitchen. You don’t think pretty women just sit at home all day, do you?” Mrs.

Mulberry said comically. Joe shared in the laughter but something tugged at him. "Well certainly not. Besides, the Mulberry's have a history of acquiring very strong and beautiful women. "You know, Mrs. Mulberry, as beautiful as you are, something about you seems vaguely familiar. "Oh yea?" Mrs. Mulberry said trying not to appear as uncomfortable as she truly was. Naturally, Mrs. Mulberry interjected in his wife's defense. " Well we do have the privilege of knowing just about everyone and being seen by everyone in town. Not to brag, Joe, but my misses here catches a lot of eyes." Mr. Mulberry said while rocking from his heels to his toes. " Well, that is true. I guess I've been so busy trying to get my new shop up and running that I lost track of all the goings-on around town. Once things get going smoothly, I hope to be seeing more of you Mrs. Mulberry. Mrs. Mulberry coughed to get over what seemed like an indecorous advance. Mr. Mulberry frowned but in a very non-confrontational way. "Oh I mean that in the most respectful way, of course. I'd love to have you two over to my shop for a drink sometime so we can all catch up. " Ah, yes!" Mr. and Mrs. Mulberry said together as if brain twins. Joe headed his way down the street while the Mulberry's looked onward and adjusted their faces and clothes for their staring admirers.

Nearby a group of elder ladies sat outside an outdoor cafe, enjoying tea on a balmy afternoon. Although they could barely hear the conversation that had just transpired, they had a clear view of Mrs. Mulberry and had for many months now right from their usual afternoon table. "You know ladies," Rose said, "I've been a woman now for nearly eighty-six years," while appearing to be staring off into space but really focused on the Mulberry's as they showed off their finest for all on the busied streets of town. "Well you and the rest of us," Eleanor, another of the ladies, humored. The other two ladies hummed but said nothing. All four of them were on the same page. "And I guess with eighty-six years of womanhood I would know another woman when I saw one. " Uh-huh" the other ladies chimed while indulging their tea. "And, I suppose, being among the oldest in this town, having lived here my entire life and nowhere else, and knowing, or knowing of, virtually everyone here, I'd recognize a familiar person even she...he...were supposed to be dead? "Uh huh" the ladies chimed again but this time a few pages ahead of Rose who apparently had been late one too many days for tea in the afternoon.

Mr. and Mrs. Mulberry continued their stroll as they turned onto main street. The sight of her usual haunts reminded her of a much needed stop she needed to make. "Oh I usually make this run while you're at the office, but you wouldn't mind attending me to the cosmetics store over there would you, sweetie?" Mrs. Mulberry asked with a look of pure innocence upon her face. Mr. Mulberry immediately fidgeted for his wallet to be sure it was in the pocket in which he left it. " Why of course not," he said. Mr. Mulberry was not a *no* man. If his wife asked, the answer was always yes. *No* was no where in his vocabulary, no where to found in his blood or any fiber of his body. Mr. Mulberry felt that as a tiny man people would be much kinder to him if he simply always obliged. His father once warned about this. His father always said that man who can't say no, whose *yes-to-know-ratio* was *out-of-balance*, as he put it, will be walked over and tricked by every man in town. A man's first-line-of defense, his father preached, was in his decline. Still, Mr. Mulberry couldn't see the light and so his disposition was to always be in agreement.

"Ah, Mrs. Mulberry. I wasn't expecting to see you so soon again, not at least for another week at least," Page Witherton, the owner's wife and storekeeper, greeted. " Well it seems I've used more make-up than I usually do this past month," Mrs. Mulberry explained. " Mr. Mulberry stayed back near the door of the shop but quickly wondered exactly how much make-up his wife actually did consume. He never gave it much thought previously. In fact, he'd forgotten altogether that his wife wore make-up at all. "Not that you need a drop of it Mrs. Mulberry, of course," Page said in a greedy kind of way behind the cash register. Mrs. Mulberry looked around the store after grabbing her usual when a new product

caught her attention. Page read her mind before she could ask. “Oh, Mrs. Mulberry, that’s a new product line just in this morning. It has wonderful reviews the dailies. The line is called *His Secret*.” Mrs. Mulberry nervously dropped the product to the floor. “His Secret?” Mrs. Mulberry asked surprised in a deep voice not her own – a voice so distinct that made it seem they were the only ones in the shop. Mr. Mulberry looked around expecting to find someone else, perhaps a gentlemen shopping on behalf of his wife. “Are you alright Mrs. Mulberry,” asked Page. “Ah, yes, it’s just that I’ve had a cold as of late and I guess it’s progressing in the worse direction possible. Well, that’s an interesting name for a make-up line, no?” “Yes, an article in the Times said that a man came up with the formula using his wife’s secret ingredient. It’s all the rage. I suppose that’s why it’s a secret,” said Page. “Then why not call it Her Secret,” wondered Mrs. Mulberry. Page thought about it and came up with nothing. “Well, I don’t know. Still in mid thought, the tea-sipping, old-lady crowd entered the store. Greetings were all in order. Mr. Mulberry tipped his hat and issued respects appropriate for women of advanced age. Rose, leading the group of four into the store and now up to speed--or shall one say up to tea--joined Mrs. Mulberry and Page. Mr. Mulberry remained a gentlemen and guarded the door, letting the women on with their business, remaining all ears but painfully clueless. “Rose, ladies, as always it’s nice to have you in the shop on this fine afternoon,” Page greeted while thinking of the dollars they might all spend and removing herself from behind the counter. “Well it’s nice to be here,” said Eleanor, “we thought we’d stop in to see what’s new...or, as my husband might say, what’s strange around our favorite places in town” while looking with the corner of her eye at Mrs. Mulberry. The other three ladies agreed with their facial expressions to the stated agenda. “Well, as I was just telling Mrs. Mulberry, we’ve got a new product line and---” Mrs. Mulberry interrupted in an attempt to excuse herself but visibly uncomfortable. “Well, I’ll let you ladies get on. I’m ready to check out now, Page.” Mrs. Mulberry moved closer to the register but Page and the ladies, with their fancy summer dresses and decorative hats and clutches were hoping she’d stay awhile. Mr. Mulberry put on his hat feeling his wife’s readiness to leave when Rose made her debut. “Hello, darling, I’m Rose,” extending her hand in a very lady-like, formal way. “I’ve heard so much about you Mrs. Mulberry, seen you all over town, but I don’t think we’ve actually met.” The other ladies moved close behind Rose, inspecting Mrs. Mulberry’s features. Mrs. Mulberry grew tense. Her forehead broke out in a sweat. Her nerves writhed. “Well, certainly you know my name. It’s nice to meet you Rose, and ladies.” Mrs. Mulberry gestured toward her husband near the door. “And certainly you know my husband, Mr. Mulberry.” “Of course we know Frank, all the ladies said in unison and on the same page. Then Rose continued on her own. “I also knew his father and mother. I should add that his father was a very wise man. The Mulberry’s are legends in this town. I even remember when Frank was growing up, in fact. We old ladies were wondering why it took him so long to acquire a wife. I guess now we no longer have to worry about his being alone.” Mr. Mulberry blushed revealing his kid heart. “Well I’m happy to be the first and last Mrs. Mulberry...honored is more like it,” she said smiling nervously. The women all smiled graciously and moved closer to Mrs. Mulberry, their collective presence exacting a planned application of pressure. Rose continued with her investigation. “You know, Mrs. Mulberry, I don’t think I ever caught your full name—maiden or otherwise. Care if I ask?” Mrs. Mulberry hit a breaking point and answered inconceivably: “Well I’m Roy Striver. “Roy Striver?! Everyone asked at the same time with excitement coating their voices, but not all of them on the same page. “Oh, silly me, this cold coming on has really gone to my head. I’m Sarah, Sarah Mulberry, of course. Most formally Sarah Prickett of Washington county. “Mmmm” the elder ladies expressed at the same time. Page looked dazed and confused. Mr. Mulberry decided that it was best he and his wife left. “You’ll have to excuse us ladies. My wife has been not feeling her best. She’ll have to socialize another afternoon. Mr. Mulberry found the peculiarities alarming himself but he resolved in his mind to sort them out later. Mr. Mulberry threw some cash on the counter and gently took his wife by her hand. The elder ladies wouldn’t dare argue with a man of his stature, of his pedigree, and so humbly bowed their heads and allowed Mr. and Mrs. Mulberry their way and bid their farewells.

The elder ladies then turned to Page, their faces nearly frantic. This time Eleanor lead the inquiry. “Page, my dear, who is Roy Striver?” “I was just wondering the same thing. That name does sound so familiar. I’d wonder why she’d give that name or any name other than her own for that matter.” Well, we have an idea,” said Rose, “but it may not be any of our business. That is if we are supposed to be decent citizens of this town.” “What do you mean, Rose?” asked Page. “What I mean is that we should mind our business and things will work themselves out” Rose said while making steady eye contact with Eleanor. The other ladies nodded in that all-knowing kind of way. All on the same page. “Mr. Mulberry comes from good stock. He isn’t the fastest but he’s not dumb either,” said Rose. “Whatever do you mean?” Page asked, genuinely not on the same page. Eleanor veered over at the vanity in a corner of the shop and an old newspaper crinkled under it caught her eye. Instinctively she went to pick it up and the front page captured her. “Hey, this paper has got to be several years old now. Hey, Page, Mrs. Mulberry spends a lot of time in here doesn’t she? “Yes, in fact she spends hours at that vanity trying on different make ups. She typically has a few newspapers with her that she obsesses over. She must have dropped that some time ago. I didn’t even realize it was there. My mother always told me I do a terrible job at sweeping,” Page rambled on. “Get this!” Eleanor called out for attention as she prepared herself to read the headline aloud. “A Roy Striver of Muscatine County Crashes Car But Remains/Body Vanished.” All the ladies look at one another as if just attaining some degree of clarity. Peering over her spectacles at the others, and minder her training in the decorous art of discretion, Eleanor declared, “I have a feeling Mr. Mulberry is going to figure this out very soon indeed. The two other elder ladies nodded and said “mmmhmm.”

Mr. and Mrs. Mulberry returned to their mansion on top of the hill. A house servant stood outside awaiting their return and taking in the view of the entire town below. Mr. Mulberry put the car in park after a ten minute drive of complete silence. He had spent the drive home thinking about how odd the afternoon had been, about Joe taking a particular interest in his wife’s identity, the strange voice he heard in the cosmetic shop, and why his wife would –sick or not—identify herself by another name. A man, as all successful man do, who reads the newspapers religiously couldn’t get the name *Roy Striver* out of his mind. In an age of discretion, he didn’t ask, but his instincts begged of his curiosity to find what it was it wanted to know. “Well thank you, my fine gentleman, for another wonderful afternoon about town,” Mrs. Mulberry said before planting a kiss on Mr. Mulberry’s cheek and taking the helping hand offered by the servant to assist out of the car. Mr. Mulberry exited and told the servant “the misses and I are skipping dinner tonight to retire to bed early. Please be sure to close up all the drapes at the first sight of the moon.” The servant nodded in compliance and Mrs. Mulberry towered over her husband as they joined arm-in-arm and walked toward the front door. The sun set quickly on this night and the moon, faster than was known possible, rushed to look over the evening with its light. But the servant absentmindedly forgot to close the drapes in the house. The drapes that, in every house, protects the secrets the house intends to keep after dark. Mr. Mulberry waited patiently in the arm chair in the master bedroom as Mrs. Mulberry toiled in the powder room. She had talked of romance on this night in which the couple seldom ever engaged. In their nearly three years of marriage, sex was not the ingredient to the love and admiration they had for one another. But tonight Mrs. Mulberry felt they needed to reconnect in a close, intimate way kind of way. Mr. Mulberry was feeling more inquisitive than aroused but, as always, willing to oblige his wife. “My love,” he called from the chair outside her powder room, “I know you are somewhat fond of newspapers unlike many other women. Have you by chance ever heard of that Striver fellow who disappeared some years back?” “Mmmm...it doesn’t ring a bell,” Mrs. Mulberry answered in a dumb manner appropriate for blond women. Mrs. Mulberry grew nervous again but thought changing the topic would be rudely suspect so she entertained him. “What about him dear?” “Well I didn’t know him myself, but, uh, he was a tall man who....” before he could finish Mrs. Mulberry emerged from the powder room in a silk white

gown and took to her husband's lap. Her beauty, never failing, shifted his focus but only temporarily. The two kissed passionately then Mr. Mulberry stopped to look deep into his wife's eyes. "My love, do you always wear make-up?" He asked. She laughed. "Well I am a lady am I not?" "Well, yes, of course, but I don't think I've ever seen you without makeup." "Mrs. Mulberry smiled, got up and turned off the light. This was usual preceding their love making. She guided him to the bed and on top of her while they assumed a comfortable position under the covers. "And why do we only have sex with the lights off? He asked. "Oh my, Mr. Mulberry, you sure have a lot of questions tonight, don't you? Mrs. Mulberry asked in a seductive tone. "Well I rarely ask questions so I thought you might oblige me just for tonight. I've been thinking and we've been married for over 3 years now and neither of us are getting any younger. Do you think it's time we have a child for the family's namesake? Mrs. Mulberry smiled again with seduction. "Well let me try to answer some of those questions for you," she said as she spread her legs and drew him closer. They resumed their passionate frolicking for some interval but Mr. Mulberry's curiosity wasn't sated. He worked his hands down the middle of his wife's thighs, his fingers grew more intelligent than they had ever been before, and then they hit a snag. "What on God's green earth is that?!" Mr. Mulberry screamed. Frantically he reached toward the night stand and turned off the light. He looked at what his fingers found and then locked eyes with his still beautiful wife, who asked in the way she'd asked for everything during their entire marriage, "are we on the same page?" To which Mr. Mulberry, still frozen in shock, replied "No."