

## Easter Eggs

By John Kimmey

"Well, I guess it's time to go," Rick announced."

"I just hope nobody mentions Sarah," Mary said in a subdued tone.

"They won't. Don't forget, you're the one the kids want to see. Nothing like a grandmother. All those poems they've written about you, one framed and hung up next to the pantry, another stuck on the refrigerator."

"I don't think I'll ever get over the months Cynthia stayed with us after what she went through, going to that rehabilitation center at Lake Lure with that awful other thing hanging over her. So much to cope with at her age."

"She didn't want to go home, did she? You helped get rid of her addiction just as much as they did up in North Carolina."

"Oh, Rick, I feel so sorry for her, Amy and Ellen too. The worst thing in the world is losing someone like that, and you can't talk about it without breaking down. If only Judy doesn't mention it while saying the blessing."

"She won't. She'll substitute a Bon Appetite and we'll all raise our wine glasses and toast the Livingstons and the Joiners."

"By the way she's having mushroom soup, ham, sweet potatoes, squash, peas, a salad, and Queen of Sheba cake. Let's hope she's all right, the MS hasn't slowed her down too much. She says she still walks around the neighborhood, drives downtown to have lunch with friends but no more golf or tennis. Too bad she had to sell The Café on the Square. All the years she put into it."

"What about Mark? How do you think he's dealing with everything?"

"Glum as usual, not saying much. Remember when he was growing up, always so cheerful, loved to tease and tell jokes. Could do everything around the house. Helped me repaint the kitchen, paper the bathrooms. When he left for the university and then medical school, we didn't know what we'd do without him."

"The two of them never should have gotten married and by a judge in Richmond with no family or friends around."

"His decision after he said after she agreed to bring up the children Catholic. He always did his own thing. Not going to Davidson the way I wanted him to. Preferring the university and rooming with Ed Herlong he had known since kindergarten. Remember when he asked me if he should marry Sarah, and he said he didn't know what would happen to her if he didn't. And I told him that wasn't a good reason for marrying someone. He went right ahead."

"You couldn't change him, Mary, even though you used to work in Mental Health. He has to do his own thing."

"Talk about doing his own thing. I'll never forget Cynthia's baptism at St. Mary's. Remember when he came down from Charlottesville that Sunday with Sarah and the baby and not telling her what he was up to. Just before leaving for the ceremony springing it on her and she cursing him and crying and running into the back bedroom slamming the door. But you have to give her credit. When we came back with my parents and Ed and Betty, there she was in the front room freshly dressed for the little reception I arranged, fresh makeup, another blouse and skirt and those fashionable boots. Nobody mentioning where we'd been. Put Cynthia in the crib in the guest bedroom. She

suppressed her bitterness all right, accepted the inevitable. But she paid a price. So did Mark, one day walking out and taking an apartment for awhile and the kids crying. Couldn't stand it. When Cynthia was here, she told me she wanted nothing more to do with religion. Called it crap. Said she used to alternate between going to St. Joseph's one weekend and to the synagogue the next, Amy and Ellen too. No more. But she and her sisters still avoid eating pork and observe the eight days of Hannukkah every year."

"At least they have their father to believe in. If there's a god he's it. Just don't cry when you see her. The poor girl looked lost when she left, not knowing what she was going back to."

"She'll recover, Rick. She's a strong person."

"You certainly did everything you could for her, got her out of going to a tanning salon every week, persuaded her to look at *Time* we get as well as those magazines she bought, *People*, *Okay*, and *Style*. Told her to go shopping and to the movies instead of spending every afternoon watching soap operas, *Opera* and *Ellen*. Reading a mystery at night rather than playing solitaire on the laptop in her room. And you had her talking about how she got into drugs and what it was like. How a dealer threatened Mark if he didn't get his money. She became so fond of you, Mary."

"A lot like her mother in so many ways, staying in her room, isolating herself. She'll get over it."

"You hope, and that she'll never..."

"Okay, enough of this. On to St. Mary's. We should have gone to the Sunrise Service."

"I don't think that would have put you in a better mood."

It was an hour and a half drive up 25 to Mission, North Carolina called by some the San Francisco of the Appalachians. Leaving behind Sparta, South Carolina and its car dealerships, Baptist churches, and textile mills converted to condos. Reaching the foothills and viewing acres of trees minus their leaves standing tall and straight amid a few dogwoods and Bradford Pears in bloom. Peach and firework stands closed, clusters of mobile homes, a lumber yard, a field filled with old yellow school busses. Going by a large Confederate flag flying in front of a log cabin store with a sign The Dixie Nation. The in-between season Mary loved so much with the cold days gone, the hot ones coming, the cool ones so refreshing here in the mountains.

Another Livingston family dinner at the Joiners with Judy's children Beth and Jimmy, Mark's Cynthia, Amy, and Ellen. At least nobody would be wondering why Sarah wasn't there or making a comment about her absence. Which started Mary reminiscing to herself about that Sunday last July. She was getting home from St. Mary's and entering the kitchen from the carport when the phone began ringing. Hurrying to answer it before Rick did, in the den with the door closed preparing for his summer school 17th century history class at the university on Monday. It was Mark in his laconic mode, this time more dispirited than usual. Sarah died last night. Cynthia went up to see her about breakfast and found her in bed, eyes shut, not stirring or breathing. An empty vial and glass along with a bottle on the night table. It wasn't suicide. She just took too many sleeping pills on top of too much vodka. She'd been having difficulty sleeping. Except Mary remembered on the day of Amy's high school graduation in June he had to rush her

to ER to have her stomach pumped. Never explaining what was wrong with her. Just depressed. Yes, the most depressed person she ever met.

Now the darkness had drained the life out of her. Or was it as her Aunt Ruth suggested at the funeral, her failure to recover from her mother dying at forty-seven and leaving a thirteen-year-old to live with a reclusive father unable to get over his wife's death. He owned a grocery in a tightly-knit Jewish community of Cincinnati where she was buried. Mark was the first Christian she ever dated. Then she had overdrawn on her Visa card and was summoned to appear in court Monday. Worst of all she felt she was a misfit in the family.

A Phi Beta Kappa majoring in the Classics at Oberlin, a top student in her class at the Medical University in Charleston that her aunt persuaded her to attend and where her husband taught. A decision Ruth said she regretted. If only her internship at the Veterans Hospital in Richmond with Mark followed by their residency together at the University of Virginia hospital had been successful. He said she was having trouble doing sutures and getting along with patients in ER and finally had to resign when pregnant with Cynthia. Academically a brilliant doctor, practicing a struggling one.

Going over that child's history reminded Mary what a hard time she had growing up, when only ten, acting as a mother to her sisters, fixing their breakfast, seeing they made the school bus on time, helping them with their homework. Dishes to do, beds to make. Later when she got her driver's license doing most of the shopping and chauffeuring while her mother stayed in her shell.

And what about that week Mary went to Charlottesville to help her daughter-in-law and found chaos. No schedule for the children's sleeping, eating, going to bed. Worst

of all walking into a semi-darkened house upon arriving by cab from the airport and noticing the shades down, the kids asleep in front of the TV, and Sarah sitting in the La-Z-Boy reading a mystery. When Mark arrived from the hospital at six, she said closing her book, "Your turn. I've had them all day." Off she went upstairs to her room. In the meantime he fed his daughters, read them a story, and put them to bed.

During that week Mary discovered month-old food in the refrigerator, a pile of the *New York Times* Sunday travel section in the hall closet, several of them featuring Israel where she kept talking about visiting, looking only at Fox News because of its strong support of Israel. Everyday a UPS truck arrived with packages, jewelry, pottery, books, even one time a steak. Afternoons she babysat while Sarah went mall shopping, bringing home purchases she never opened. Rarely made a bed, seldom did the dishes or the laundry which she left most of the time to Cynthia and her father. What disturbed Mary more than anything was the fact her son appeared to be doing nothing about the situation, the children neglected, the mother off by herself, the father busy with his patients, she wanting one kind of family, he another? Why didn't he demand she see a psychiatrist despite her refusal, both of them see a marriage counselor? He tried and failed. What about a divorce? That would devastate the children. He could lose them and who knows what would happen to him.

"You're silent," Rick said as they left 25 and entered I-26, a sign reading 2,300 feet, moving closer and closer to their destination. "What's on your mind?"

"What's on yours?"

"A Bloody Mary," he said jauntily. "Waiting for Judy to tell more stories about the café she once owned. Remember the one about the Indians who came there after a

day acting in that movie, "The Trail of Tears" about the Cherokees forced out of Georgia. They'd be whooping it up and causing a fire in the bathroom. And Steve's stories. They're great, especially the one about his going to that Florida nudist country club to set up a computer program and seeing couples at the bar sitting on towels and wondering how they looked playing tennis if they ever did."

"Oh, Rick, why do you bring up things like that at a time like this. They're not funny."

"Yeah, not the holiday season, is it?"

In no time they were crossing the Cold River and entering the Express Way leading into the city's narrow hilly streets lined with clothing and shoe stores, bars and restaurants, antique and art supply shops. A World War I Monument stood in the middle of Wolfe Square. Everywhere tourists were shuffling along checking out store windows, noticing Ed Hopper's work on display at the Art Museum. Not as many here as in October to view the autumn leaves. A guitarist was singing away beside The Café on the Square and in front of a Pizza parlor and a Chinese restaurant while down the street a saxophonist stood outside the Art Theater honking away. Everywhere the homeless walking their dogs, hippies and students congregating outside the Happy Book Store, retired couples on benches watching the Easter parade. Down along the river breweries and art galleries flourished in remodeled warehouses.

They turned off Maple Avenue and drove up Sunset Parkway with a green island of trees and bushes in the middle, climbed the hill to Canterbury Lane and the Joiners' three-storied brick house on the corner with a columned entrance and an open porch on the side. After parking behind Mark's Lexus with Virginia license plates, they headed

across the street, a ginkgo tree and a dogwood in the yard along with a stone bench. There waiting for them at the front door stood their daughter Judy smiling away, the black hair, the chubby face, those large, brown, lively eyes, looking more like a woman in her '30's than early '50's despite leaning on a cane with three points.

"Oh, Mother, a new dress for Easter."

"An old one I found in the closet."

"Hey, Daddy, how's the Volvo? Had it gone over for the long trip?" She guffawed in that deep-throated cigarette voice of hers?

"Made it without a check up this time. Love this mountain air. No wonder TB patients came here years ago and lived in those green cottages in the hills behind your house."

Walking into the hall, Mary looked around at the grandfather clock in the corner, the hat and coat rack, the Waterford chandelier, and most of all the magnificent stairway curving up to the second floor, family pictures on the wall ascending with it. What she admired most about the house were the high ceilings and the spacious rooms along with a claw-footed bathtub and the Tree of Life wallpaper in the dining room. Such a contrast to the boxy, brick ranch house she and Rick had lived in for almost forty years.

"Hi, Mom, Dad," their son Mark, tall, dark, and sharp-faced greeted them coming from the living room in a rare good mood. Wearing a wool shirt, cargo pants, rough shoes, he wasn't one to dress up for an occasion. Behind him loomed a hefty, middle-aged woman also casually dressed. He introduced Rosalie Rossini. Immediately Mary wondered if she were just a friend or a potentially new wife. The opposite of Sarah, no soft voice, no shyness, no bookish demeanor. Later Mary learned she was a realtor in

Charlottesville who sold Mark his house. Sent him a consoling note when Sarah died and invited him to lunch. Now here she was several months later acting as if she were part of the family. Mary couldn't believe her son would find a wife so soon, particularly one that didn't seem his type. Cynthia had told her he promised never to marry again. If he did, she couldn't help speculating such a robust woman would shake up that family.

They sauntered into the living room with its red walls, a white medallion in the ceiling, a fireplace with low bookcases on each side. A door led to the porch and French doors at the rear to a flag-stone deck. Beyond lay an English garden with boxwood, gravel paths, a fountain in the center, and in the back by a fence a gray iron Confederate cross supposedly marking a grave. Steve said it came with the house, a decorative piece, no burial site.

The cousins were all there chatting and laughing away, evoking those beach vacations on the Isle of Palms not so many years ago when they'd sit downstairs watching rented movies and the soap opera *Passions*, reading books, playing Spades. At ten o'clock off they'd trek to the beach in their bathing suits carrying collapsible chairs, towels, books, a radio, sun screen. Once in awhile Mark would rent a boat at the marina and take them tubing. Sarah seldom came to those beach vacations, but when she did she wore a large Star of David around her neck.

"Oh, Grandmother, "they called out rushing over to greet her. "We didn't think you'd come."

"Too old, huh? Just slow getting here. I wouldn't miss seeing you all again for anything." Glancing around and noticing how different everyone appeared. Cynthia more outgoing than she remembered, but less lipstick and purple eye shadow, a longer skirt,

flats instead of those spiked heel shoes, no décolleté. A tattoo appeared around her right wrist. She explained it was her mother's name in Hebrew. Amy didn't seem as withdrawn although still not saying much, studs in her ears, nose, and one on her tongue, her hair reddish now instead of brown. Ellen appeared heavier, no makeup, jeans and a T shirt, not saying much, acting more like an observer rather than a non-precipitant. As for Judy's two, Beth an ash blonde, appeared as buoyant looking as ever, that smooth round face, a loose blouse, little makeup; Jimmy with that arrow-like face smiling away talking about politics rather than Dan Millman's books about building self-confidence that he devoured when he was playing in tennis tournaments.

What an attractive group each with a distinctive personality. Thank God, Cynthia was out of the drug scene. Amy no longer seemed to be the remote girl her mother indicated she was, complaining about never knowing what she was up to. Ellen had shed a boyfriend in a rock band when she discovered he was dating someone else at the same time according to her mother's hairdresser. Somehow Judy's two seemed not only more social-minded and athletic than Mark's three but closer to their parents, attending high school plays Beth was in and Jimmy's tennis matches, going to Prince of Peace with them Sundays.

Two such different families yet when together the children acted more like siblings than cousins. All with various shades of dark skin except for Beth with her Swedish blonde look similar to her father's, large expressive eyes, reserved demeanors when facing adults that disappeared when by themselves. Mark's three were definitely more reserved, Judy's more social and athletic like their parents, Steven particularly and the two of them talked of goals, Beth to be an actress, Jimmy to be a lawyer. Only Ellen

among her sisters mentioned what she wanted to be, a writer. Mary always found her reading a book, usually a novel.

Surveying everybody, Mary missed Sarah. Not that they were close, but at gatherings like this they tended to gravitate toward each other talking about books and their children. Yet today no matter how poignantly her daughter-in-law preyed on her mind she couldn't bring her into the conversation. Not with Rosalie in a sense taking her place. Cynthia and she scarcely spoke. When they did, it was short but not sweet. Could she be worrying about the new woman in her life becoming a stepmother?

All through dinner Mary watched the children reacting to the stranger in their midst. Regaling them with funny stories about selling houses and growing up in a large Italian family in New Jersey, three girls and two boys. And they seemed to be enjoying her humor while at the same time trying to figure out how they were going to adjust to this person if she became as permanent as the furniture. She carried on as if she were thrusting herself into that role, a lapsed Catholic twice divorced and having no children. A last chance to be the member of a family. Also was it Mark's last chance to give his girls someone to look after them, provide him with a more satisfying and less solitary life?

Driving back to Sparta in the late afternoon, Mary started talking about the gift Sarah sent her before her life ended. A two-piece heart-shaped crystal with an embedded Claddah Ring---two gold hands embracing an emerald. She had picked it up in Ireland last spring when Mark took the family on an European vacation. A symbol of their affection for each other that would haunt Mary the rest of her life. She kept it on the

living room table under the Tiffany lamp so that every time she went by she could touch it.

"Well," Rick said as they approached Sparta, "what do you think? Great to be with the family again, wasn't it? Mark telling funny stories about his patients for a change, Steve about places he's been. Judy didn't seem to have any trouble getting around with that cane. The menu was perfect. She makes a terrific Queen of Sheba cake."

"She was more her old spirited self, but I think she's still cursing her condition. Says she has a harder time getting to Mass and sitting through it."

"Still she swims, cooks, reads, drives, does needle work, goes to Yoga."

"But if you complain about having a cold or headache she'll say at least you don't have MS."

"Envious of us, huh?"

"And worried about the future. One day everything could be bleak, the next day bleaker."

"But on the third day she could be on cloud nine, not down in the dumps. Still has her old spirit. She mentioned going to the Sunrise Service. By the way you know Easter's named after Eostre, the Anglo Saxon goddess of spring. Maybe if Rosalie becomes Sarah's successor she'll revive Mark and the kids."

"Oh, Rick, they'll never be a successor to Sarah. You know this was the first time she either hasn't been with us or we haven't talked about her not being with us. One of her favorite holidays she told me once is Thanksgiving. Too bad we never got to share it with her along with so many other occasions. Such a quiet, gentle person. Cynthia told me at the funeral her cousin Larry Israel talked about her reading Dostoyevsky's novels and

writing comments in the margin. Said she was so witty and so much fun to be with. Made her cry listening to him describe her mother before she married her father."

"Think she ever had a presentiment of a Rosalie."

"I heard she's persuaded Mark to finance Cynthia to set up a dress shop in Charlottesville. She majored in marketing at the university. Getting Amy interested in going to cooking school in Charlotte. Told Ellen after she graduates from Kenyon she should go to Carnegie Mellon and become a journalist she writes so well."

"I never heard any of that."

"Because you were talking all the time with Mark and Steve about ACC and SEC football. And you missed the story of Cynthia having a car accident the night before Sarah died and the police finding marijuana in the glove compartment. Mark got her off."

"Thank God, she's over that stage of her life. Now maybe they all can learn to live with what happened, and Mark will be his jolly old self again."

"But what if something happens to him?"

"There's a stepmother waiting in the wings."

"A godsend maybe but never a substitute," Mary said turning to look at her husband as they were driving into the carport at 403 Sylvan Drive in the Bradford North subdivision, once more back where Mark and Judy got their roots and were on their way to getting their wings. Now she thought if only Mark's three could get theirs someday.

Stuffed after the feast at their daughter's, they had a light supper, Pug cheese and crackers, a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, mixed fruit, hot tea. No more seeing everybody until Christmas. Maybe then there will be good news, Cynthia's shop is doing well, Amy is interning as a sou chef, Ellen is getting A's and reading manuscripts for *The Kenyon*

*Review.* As for the Joiners, Beth is a senior at Sparta High and planning to audition for Chekov's "Three Sisters" and having her first prom date, Jimmy is thinking of going to law school after graduating from Davidson.

Yes, Mary concluded it had been a good Easter despite everything.

"Hey," Rick said, where's that old imagination of disaster of yours?"

"Now it's the imagination of hope."

"How can you change so quickly?"

"Remember the Easter they all came here and Sarah and Judy painted eggs and hid them for the kids to find. Laura's were blue, Judy's green. There must have been twenty of more. And some were never found."

"So what?"

"Have everyone come next year and let the kids look for those lost even though they're too old for that sort of thing now."

"And the eggs will be too old, too, won't they, if they haven't already disintegrated?"

"Pieces of the shells could still be under the pines and among the azaleas. I found out they last a long time. Anyway it would be great bringing them back here, the only time Sarah joined us during a religious holiday."

"Did she ever talk about it later one?"

"Probably not since nobody acted as if it was anything special. We all went to the Sunrise Service except Sarah who stayed home with the eggs. She seemed to enjoy working on them. What a different time all right."

"So you're counting on Mark and the kids going along with this fantasy of yours."

"Maybe he wouldn't remember that day. He has a habit of forgetting things he doesn't want to think about. I'm sure, though, the kids would be excited. That was one time except for the beach when nothing mattered except being with each other."

"You're dreaming."

"What the day is all about, the body never found in the tomb, going to heaven and coming back one day."

"But she never was a part of all that."

"You mean because parallel lines never meet. That's what you're saying."

"I guess so. How could they? You know how strong her faith was, his too. Come on let's go to bed before you get too carried away and have her descending in a parachute."

"I can't help it, Rick. She belonged with us and felt separated the longer she was married. But that weekend there were no parallel lines, just a circle with the center everywhere and the circumference nowhere."

"Why do you think she ever married Mark?"

"Who knows? Maybe because she needed someone and he did too, neither of them thinking about the consequences. Then both were in the same class at medical school and had their internship and residence together and thought they could make it."

"And they had kids. But sometimes, Mary, none of that is enough when what's in your heart possesses you."

"It can make things easier in one way and difficult in another."

"And the difficulty can be smoothed over by discovering scraps of hidden old eggs."

"There's nothing like evoking the past to heal the present."

"Or the present to remind you of the past."