

ON THE PORCH AND THE DEVIL MAY DARE

by

Tisha Bender

NAME: Tisha Bender

WHERE I'M FROM: Summit, NJ

BIO: I teach Writing at Rutgers University

EMAIL: tisha.bender@gmail.com

WHAT'S KEEPING ME POSITIVE: Nice creative writing distractions, such as
this

THE CHARACTERS

MARTHA: Mother of Sharon, who has had financial problems in her life

SHARON: Martha's kind, sympathetic daughter

HARRY: Sharon's boisterous, young son

FRED: Sharon's other boisterous, young son

JOE: Martha's Father

STELLA: Martha's Mother

NEAL: A talented trumpeter, who keenly wants to marry Martha

THE DEVIL: Speaks for itself, though this Devil might have some surprises

ACT 1: Martha's Party, 2019

ACT 2: Martha's Memories, 1975

Scene 1: On the Porch

Scene 2: In Martha's Bedroom

ACT 3: After Martha's Party, 2019

MUSIC: *Red Hot Chili Peppers*, Songs from Californication

Verdi, *Aida*: The Triumphal March

ACT 1: MARTHA'S PARTY, 2019

[It's a warm summer evening of the year 2019. Martha sits on a rocking chair on a rather dilapidated porch of an old Victorian House, looking out over the garden which is overgrown with weeds. The lower windows of the house are brightly illuminated with a golden light spilling out from each of them, and there is discordant funk metal music and loud voices spilling out from the house. A younger woman exits through the French doors and comes and sits by Martha.]

MARTHA: I can't believe how huge those weeds have grown. Why, they're almost trees!

SHARON: Yes, Mother! You could always call in a landscaper, you know. Too much to do on your own. But anyway, why are you sitting out here alone? Everyone wants you to come back inside. It's your party! Come and enjoy it!

[Two small children come running onto the porch.]

HARRY: Granny, why are you out here? You're missing all the fun! They're about to start the puppet show in a minute!

FRED: Yeah, Granny. You've always played puppets with us, so you should come in and watch this. Mom, why isn't Granny inside with us?

SHARON: Granny and I will be in in a minute. Run along now, boys.

FRED: But can we have cake now? Can we? Can we?

MARTHA: Of course you should have some cake. Go on; do as you Mom told you and we will have a huge slice of cake with you in a minute.

[The boys run back inside the house, yelling excitedly about cake and puppets.]

SHARON: Ready? Shall we go back inside now?

MARTHA: Not yet. Give me a few minutes.

SHARON: Are you all right? You just came into a small fortune, and decided to hold this enormous family party for us all to celebrate your good fortune, and now you are out here alone not joining in with any of the fun. What's going on, Mom?

MARTHA: Nothing's going on. You go back in with your boys. I just want to savor this nice evening air.

SHARON: Well, as long as you're out here, I want to stay with you.

MARTHA: *[Placing her hand appreciatively on Sharon's arm.]* You're a dear. Always have been. Not that Susan and Amos aren't also good to me. I've raised incredible children. But you've always been the one closest to me. Not that I should admit to such a thing, but there it is.

SHARON: *[Looking a bit uncomfortable.]* Gee, thanks Mom. But I'm just wondering. I mean, it isn't like you to want to be alone, especially when we've all come over to be with you. Is anything bothering you?

MARTHA: *[Laughing sarcastically.]* Do you mean, is anything bothering me apart from that horrendous funk metal music?

SHARON: Oh, that! Well, I'll go inside and tell them to turn it off.

MARTHA: No, you'll do no such thing. Let them enjoy themselves.

SHARON: But you're not, and it's your party.

MARTHA: That doesn't matter. They're probably all dancing to it, and having fun, aren't they? And that's the main thing.

SHARON: It isn't exactly what Dad would've liked, is it, this noisy music?

MARTHA: Your Dad and me, we always went in for classical. It was his musical training. Although I suppose as a trumpeter, he could have turned to jazz, but no; classical was his favorite, and became mine, too.

SHARON: It's a shame Dad couldn't be here now, to know how you've become such a rich woman. After all those financial struggles. I mean; you never complained, and given how little money you both had, it's amazing, but we never lacked anything we needed. But you really didn't have much money, did you, Mom?

MARTHA: No, we had very little. Being a musician is a hard way to earn money, even though your Dad was very good at what he did. Yes; it certainly does feel incredible to suddenly have so much money. I certainly never thought I'd win that lottery, and your Dad and me tried every few months.

SHARON: Boy, Dad would certainly be celebrating like crazy! He'd be tooting away on that old trumpet like nobodies' business.

MARTHA: That he would, Sharon. That he would. *[Gazing off into the distance. She's silent for a minute. She attempts to change slightly the angle of the rocking chair, and then hesitantly she starts to speak again.]* Sharon, there's something I want to tell you. It's about your Dad. I should tell Susan and Amos, too, but you're with me now. I feel it so strongly. That's why I'm out here, on this old porch.

SHARON: *[Sounding a bit bewildered.]* What is it, Mom?

[Lights from the windows fade, and the house is no longer illuminated from outside. The music becomes fainter and then stops. There is a moonlit swirling of mist. The only part of the stage now illuminated is the little patch of porch on which Martha and Sharon sit, and then that, too darkens.]

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ACT 2: MARTHA'S MEMORIES, 1975

Scene 1: On the Porch

[It's a warm late afternoon of the year 1975. Martha is sitting on a white, wicker chair on the freshly painted sun-soaked porch of the same Victorian House, which appears grand and impressive. In front of her is a small white wicker table on which is placed a vase of flowers, and Martha has a bright fresh daisy in her dark hair. Bird song can be heard. Martha's parents, Joe and Stella, come through the French doors and join her on the porch.]

STELLA: It sure is nice out here at this time of the afternoon.

JOE: Yes, after all those tropical storms last week. Who would believe we're in the same place. So what are you up to, Martha? *[Joe sits down in a chair next to her, wheezing slightly as he does so. Stella sits across from him.]*

MARTHA: Nothing much. Just day-dreaming, I guess.

STELLA: Oh yes; and what about, young lady?

MARTHA: Well, this and that. You know.

JOE: Actually we don't know. And if it's about boys, well then, that's exactly what we have on our minds too. Right, Stella?

[Stella nods.]

JOE: Not that we want to push you out of the house, or anything, but you're in your mid-twenties now, and we've been wondering, your Mom and I, if you have any particular fella that interests you.

STELLA: Yes, dear. You know what your Father means. We just want the best for you, that's all.

MARTHA: Well, I do have two guys in mind, if you must know. Colin and Neal. I think I'm leaning towards Colin. In fact, I definitely am.

STELLA: Well that's lovely, dear. And are both of these young men interested in you?

MARTHA: Actually they are.

JOE: Splendid! And what do they do, career-wise? We want to make sure you make a good match. As a woman it doesn't matter what you do, but your husband, now; we want him to be a good bread-winner.

STELLA: That's right! You, my cute Martha, will make a lovely mother, so we hope you have loads of children. And that husband of yours should be a good, honest provider for all of you.

MARTHA: Well now; Colin, he is a banker, and is working his way up. He wants to be an investment banker and work on Wall Street one day.

JOE: Very fine. Very fine, indeed. And the other? What was his name?

MARTHA: Neal. He's a musician. He is amazing at playing the trumpet. I've heard him perform in a few concerts.

STELLA and JOE: No! No! Not a musician!

MARTHA: Why not?

JOE: That's much too precarious. Never make any money. Go for the banker any day! That's a good, solid profession, and he'll give you lots of security.

STELLA: And you'll be able to buy fine clothes and give your children lots of toys and treats. Definitely go for Colin, Martha! Your Father's quite right!

MARTHA: Well, no need to look so worried, Mom and Dad. I agree with you! I've already decided that Colin's the man for me. He's asked if we can get serious, and I've agreed.

JOE: Good job, Martha! That's my girl!

Scene 2: In Martha's Bedroom

[Martha is reading in bed, by the faint light from a small reading lamp on her bedside table. There is an open window to the left of her bed, against which the net curtains are softly blowing, and moonlight shafts through the window onto Martha's bed. Suddenly opening notes of trumpet music can be heard, and Martha leaps out of bed and looks out of the window onto the porch below.]

MARTHA: Who's there? What's going on?

NEAL: *[From the porch, calling up to Martha.]* Hi Martha! Just a serenade. I wanted to play you a little something, like Romeo and Juliet. You know. With the balcony scene.

MARTHA: Don't be crazy! What time is it?

NEAL: About 1:10 in the morning. I can't stop thinking about you, so I had to come.

MARTHA: But that's insane. What if you wake my parents?

NEAL: It's you I wanted to wake. And it looks as if I did, as you came to the window immediately, just as I wanted you to.

MARTHA: I was still awake.

NEAL: So you're awake thinking of me, too!

MARTHA: No, I didn't say I was thinking of you. I was reading.

NEAL: Let me play this music to you again! It's The Triumphal March, from Verdi's opera, *Aida*. And I feel triumphant to be speaking to you now! *[The trumpet music of the Triumphal March is heard again, this time a little louder.]*

MARTHA: Neal, for goodness sake, stop! You'll wake the whole neighborhood as well as my parents. They might even call the police!

NEAL: But this is so romantic! You peering at me from your window, the moonlight, and this glorious music of celebration. I think I love you, Martha.

MARTHA: Well sorry, Neal. But you're too late. I'm already committed to Colin. Now go home!

[Martha slams the window shut, and returns to her bed. The Triumphal March can still be heard faintly, and then there is silence. Martha goes back to bed, and resumes her reading, but finding she can't concentrate, shakes her head, puts down the book, turns off the lamp and snuggles under the covers. She appears to soon be asleep.]

[A clock ticks. Other than that there is silence in the darkened bedroom, with only some dim moonlight coming through the now closed window. But suddenly The Triumphal March is again heard, much more loudly this time. Martha is woken up, and angrily she gets out of bed and goes to the window. Opening it, she looks down to the porch, expecting to yell at Neal, but he is not there. The porch is silent and empty. But the music can still be heard, and is getting louder and louder. Martha returns to bed, her hands clapped over her ears, and pulls the blankets high up almost over her head. The music, though, reaches a crescendo, and Martha sits angrily up in bed, and detects movement at the bottom of her bed. Scared, now, she again turns on the light.]

MARTHA: Who's there? What is it? Oh my God, who are you? *[Martha is trembling, feeling terribly afraid.]*

THE DEVIL: *[dressed in red, and dancing, while playing the trumpet with great gusto. On hearing Martha's voice, he stops playing the trumpet, though continues to dance wildly.]* I'm the Devil. And you must be little Martha, aren't you?

MARTHA: *[even more terrified.]* The Devil? But how did you get in here? And what do you want? Please leave me alone. Don't harm me.

THE DEVIL: Why would I harm you? It's not your turn to die. Have no fear.

MARTHA: But you're the Devil, so how can I not be afraid?

THE DEVIL: I have a very undeserved, bad reputation. Heaven knows why. (Hell certainly doesn't.) I'm here to represent Neal. He doesn't know I'm here, and won't ever know as you musn't tell him. Or anyone else, for that matter. It's our secret. But I come to tell you that you have to marry Neal.

MARTHA: But I can't marry Neal. I've already agreed to marry Colin.

THE DEVIL: Nonsense! There's simply no comparison between the two men. You mark my words; Neal is a brilliant trumpeter. Plays almost as wildly as do I. Anyone with that skill is remarkably talented. Colin is nothing; a stuffy, boring man who you will tire of quickly.

MARTHA: But Colin is wealthy, and will become even more so. Much more so. And that's important. And it's what my parents want for me.

THE DEVIL: So it's money you're after, is it? Well, my girl; I will add this to the bargain. Marry Neal and you will come into a lot of money. That's my bargain. And let me tell you this. It's very unwise to argue with the Devil. Who knows what might happen to you if you do?

MARTHA: But you just said you didn't deserve your bad reputation.

THE DEVIL: *[growing redder and fiercer.]* Do not argue with me, my girl. Or you will be so sorry. So sorry. For all eternity. Now, do we have an agreement?

MARTHA: *[trembling again.]* Yes.

THE DEVIL: Don't disappoint. And don't forget to keep this as our secret!

[And with that, the Devil once more plays The Triumphal March, though even more loudly than before, dancing frantically as he plays. A red beam of light is focused on him as he dances and spins. Martha is seen just barely peeping

out from under the blankets. And then the bedroom is completely plunged into darkness.]

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ACT 3 – AFTER MARTHA’S PARTY, 2019

[It’s now nighttime, and the light is dim. Martha’s party is over, and all the guests have left, except for Sharon and her sons Harry and Fred, who are inside the house with their Dad, watching a TV drama. Martha and Sharon are still seated on the Porch. Most of the windows of the old Victorian house are dark, with just some flickering light from a TV screen coming from one window to the right.]

SHARON: Wow, Mom! That’s quite a story. I mean; are you sure? The Devil? You really think so?

MARTHA: Without a doubt. But it was a secret. I’ve clutched it to me for 44 years. You’re the first person I’ve ever told. And it all goes to show, you have to be careful what you wish for. I wished for money, and I just made the assumption, when the Devil said I’d get it if I married your Dad, that it would be like a wedding present, or certainly, at least, would come some time during the 40 years we were married. So do you now understand why getting all this money now, now that your Dad’s no longer here, is not what I’d expected? After all that scraping and scrimping, and trying to bring you three kids up well.

SHARON: Yes, I get it, I suppose. But does that mean you wish you hadn’t married Dad? That you wish you’d married that other guy, Colin, instead? Did you really like Colin more than Dad? Money aside, that is?

MARTHA: Frankly, I did. I did prefer Colin.

SHARON: But if you’d married him, I wouldn’t be here. Neither would Susan and Amos. Or Harry and Fred. Honestly, Mom; are we all from a disappointment?

MARTHA: Listen, honey; the thought of all of you not being born is unbearable and incomprehensible. I’m just so blessed that you are all here. As for your Dad, I gotta tell you, Sharon. At first it wasn’t easy. In fact, it kind of was like hell.

SHARON: That’s so sad. I’m so sorry, Mom.

MARTHA: But no; I’ve not finished. Then I grew to realize that my parents’ attitude made no sense to me. It was too materialistic. Sure, it helps to have money. But money isn’t everything. As The Beatles said, “Money can’t buy me love.” There’s a lot of truth to that. So slowly it dawned on me that your Dad

was a good man. The shame I used to feel about him playing his trumpet in those filthy, drafty tunnels in the New York City subways, at times, an old hat at his feet in the hope of people tossing in money, was not a bad thing. He was trying to honestly make some money when the big concert halls knew nothing about him. And we had some lucky breaks, like inheriting this grand old house from my parents. So you see, it wasn't so bad after all.

SHARON: Oh Mom, that's so lovely. And yes, what a terrible shame that Dad had to work so hard to make ends meet, and he's not here now to enjoy all this money you suddenly have. I do understand why you feel this way, I really do.

MARTHA: Come now, sweet girl. Let's say no more about it for now. It's getting quite chilly sitting out here now. Let's come on inside. And I think I'm going to go to YouTube, and play us The Triumphal March from *Aida*.

[Martha rises slowly from the rocking chair. Sharon rises, too. And together they leave the porch, and go inside the house, as the trumpet music from The Triumphal March starts to play, softly at first and then growing in volume.]

THE END