

The Madness of Ida Mae

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I stood in line at Stop & Shop in my Liz Taylor wig and a tight yellow pantsuit that pulled across my fanny like an ace bandage. I'm almost eighty years old but when I wear a push-up bra and one of my movie star wigs ain't nobody I can't charm. My wig wasn't sitting right on my head and I could feel the cashier staring at me. Her nametag said Lulu. It suited her.

"Do you have a Stop & Shop card, Ma'm?" Lulu asked, looking at me with bored dungeon eyes. Her purple hair sprouted from her head in different lengths, which made her look like a porcupine that fell into a paint bucket. The bullet holes in her ears were turning green and she had four hickeys in a circle on her neck. I wondered if they gave them out in patterns now.

"Why certainly," I said, pulling the card from my wallet. "I never leave home without it! You know they have polish you can buy for jewelry."

"Excuse me?"

"I said they have silver polish you can buy for those earrings. I use..."

"I heard you the first time lady and I like my jewelry just like it is."

"I'm just sayin'. You wouldn't believe how new it'd look if you wiped it off with some Bling Brightener, takes two seconds."

Lulu ignored me and snapped a bag open like a firecracker, throwing in my Ben & Jerry's ice cream, a bag of Lay's chips, and a pound of Oscar Mayer.

“Careful there, Lulu. Don’t be smashing my chips.”

“Have a nice day,” she said, rolling her eyes as she turned to the next person.

“You too, *Lulu*,” I said. Girls today look like vampire sluts.

When I got in my car, I pulled down the visor and checked my face in the mirror. One of my fake eyelashes was crooked and I had lipstick on my teeth.

“Fuck it,” I said and flipped the visor back in place.

Six months ago my husband, Wilfred, moved in with the hostess at Kon Tiki out on Route 4. I figured he needed to squeeze out the last drops of man juice before he dried up. Of course it’s only a matter of time before he comes back. Wilfred and I have over fifty years together and I know he wouldn’t throw that all away.

Wilfred’s sex slave was a younger woman in her sixties named Vera. I knew her from the restaurant and always thought she was a floozy. She never looked at me when she took our order and when she asked if we wanted anything else she used to raise her eyebrows at Wilfred. Vera and Wilfred took our dog Brando with them, which was fine with me since Brando used to pee on the plant in the hall and like Wilfred he had bad aim. But I would never ever divorce Wilfred; I’m just waiting ‘til he’s done making an ass of himself.

I live alone with my Siamese cat, Jackie in Summerfield, Massachusetts. I named her that because she has dark circles around both eyes and looks like she’s wearing big, round sunglasses. I always loved Jackie Kennedy even after she married Ari, the Greek shipping guy with the bags under his eyes. After Wilfred moved out, I bought two wigs, my Marilyn Monroe and my Liz Taylor. When I wear them

I pretend I'm a seductive starlet, not some lonely old broad whose husband walked out on her.

I've got a ten room purple Victorian on a street that backs up to reservation land and some scary wildlife. One day I was taking out the trash and on the way back I looked straight into the eyes of a coyote. I ran like the dickens and damn near lost my Marilyn in the driveway. Wilfred and I bought the house five years after we were married and I was still working for the phone company. The house needed work but it was solidly built and had a nice staircase and mahogany banister. I used to throw our dirty clothes over the railing because the washer was off the kitchen. Wilfred didn't like that because sometimes his underpants would land on the banister.

Over the years we added a garage and had all the hardwood floors redone. Wilfred made a brick patio in the back where we used to drink lemonade and eat Ritz crackers with slices of Cracker Barrel cheese on top. I wanted to get the little black boy carrying a lantern for the front lawn but Wilfred put his foot down on that one. I told him I don't have anything against the blacks, I just love that lawn ornament. Wilfred said that wasn't the point. So we got the pink swans on sticks that I call Dick and Liz but Wilfred said we had to put them out back.

The phone was ringing when I got home. I had to put the ice cream and bacon away so I let it ring. Wilfred's voice came over the machine and my hand stopped midair.

"Hello Ida Mae. Are you there? Pick up if you are. Okay, guess not. I'd like to stop by tonight and pick up my father's rocking chair for my studio apartment."

Studio apartment? What he's a painter now?

"I was thinking maybe around seven o'clock. Can you call me back when you get this message?"

I looked at the clock. It was 4:30. If I started the tub now, I could take a bath and change into something sexy so Wilfred would see what he was missing. My new pink halter-top came to mind. I was hoping Wilfred wanted to come back and was using the rocking chair as an excuse. I'd heard from Flo, the teller at the bank that him and Vera had broken up.

Wilfred arrived in his new Prius and seemed right at home sitting at the table with his legs crossed, looking around the kitchen. It reminded me of all the times we'd sat there together over the years. I'd made coffee and put out a plate of Oreo cookies for us.

"So I'm leaving early Thursday morning and driving to Rangely to catch some fish," he said. "I may stay overnight, I don't know."

"That's nice," I said, flicking off some non-existent lint from my pants. "You and Jackie seem to be doing well," he said. Wilfred and Jackie never got along mostly because she used to throw up in his Rockports.

"We're doing fine." (The worst thing a woman can do is let a man know she's needy.) "Jeremy's mowing the lawn and if I need him for odd jobs he comes right over," I said. I leaned over and scratched the back of my neck nudging my breast with my arm so it popped out a bit.

"He's a good kid," Wilfred said. He took a sip of coffee and stuck his pinky out like he always did. "Have you met the new neighbor across the street?" he asked.

"Yes. But I'm too busy to bother with foreigners."

Wilfred looked confused.

"She's a Ruskie, Wilfred. Her name's Mawi or Mari, I can't understand a word she says."

“I would think it’d be nice for you to have another woman living nearby.”

“We have nothing in common,” I said, adjusting my Liz and fingering the pearls Wilfred had given me on our last wedding anniversary.

“She’s a widow, right?”

I nodded. “Does she have any kids?”

“She mentioned two sons who I think she said were living in Tibet but she might have said Dedham.”

The truth was I’d been watching her since the day she moved in. I knew something funny was going on because a big woman with hair cut like a soldier came to visit her every weekend. I’d never known any lesbians except for Ellen and Rosie but I was pretty sure that’s what they were. The house was set a ways back from the road so I planned on buying binoculars so I could see closer. But Wilfred didn’t have to know everything. I believe women are more attractive when they have secrets.

“So did Vera dump you?” I asked, rearranging the sugar packets in the ceramic holder.

“Absolutely not,” he answered.

“I just thought she’d want someone her own age,” I said.

“It wasn’t that at all.”

I bent over to pat Jackie, giving Wilfred another chance to see my bosom.

“You know, Ida Mae,” he said, pausing, and giving me the once-over.

I sat up a little straighter.

“Yes?”

“It’s been six months. You really need to do more with your life. Look at me. I’ve got my own place, I’m off fishing, planning my next

adventure. Instead of sitting around reading movie magazines and wearing lopsided wigs, why don't you lose some weight and have that front tooth straightened? Who knows – there might be someone out there who'd like a companion."

I almost threw the plate of cookies at him. I jumped up, grabbing his cup and saucer and went to the sink. I started rinsing the dishes then spun around and said, "And who the hell do you think you are Cary Grant?"

Wilfred let out a sigh and stood up.

"You know I thought maybe we could have a nice conversation, Ida Mae. But I see that's impossible. You're still the same woman I married fifty years ago. Every time I've ever tried to help you, you lash back at me," he said.

"Well then why don't you keep your big trap shut?"

"Is the chair still in the basement?"

"Yes."

"And why do you still eat that junk?" he said pointing to the Oreos. "No wonder you move around like a cripple."

"You used to eat Oreos all the time."

"People change, Ida. Don't you get it?"

"Son of a bitch," I said, slamming the door after him. *What are you eating that junk for, Ida? Why don't you do something with your life?* Because I like my life, okay? So did you once upon a time. Oh but not now—now you're twenty pounds lighter and think you're Mr. Wheatgerm."

I took three eggs from the fridge. Then I went outside and stood on the patio. One by one, I threw the eggs at the old maple tree. They

splattered as they hit the bark and I watched the yolk run down the trunk.

“Asshole,” I said and walked back in the house. I took off my Liz and scratched my head.

“I should’ve made hot dogs wrapped in crescent rolls with a slice of cheese in the middle. He loved those.”

When Wilfred left me, I ordered a framed picture of Jackie Kennedy in New York City crossing the street with her hair blowing across her face. I hung it on the wall of my bedroom. Then I bought a full-length mahogany mirror so I could stand in front of it and do imitations of Liz and Marilyn.

When I wear the Marilyn I sing, “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” in a whispery voice. And when I wear the Liz, I do a scene from *Butterfield 8* and say, “Mama, face it. I was the slut of all time.”

I can’t believe how much I sound like Liz Taylor.

Every morning I have coffee and eat frosted cinnamon buns in the dining room while I watch the house across the street. The house had been empty for two years on account of the old coot that lived there died and the kids were fighting over his estate. It’s one of those white, antique capes with green shutters and a stone foundation and a nice front porch. It’s real quaint and reminds me of those lake houses in New Hampshire where you sit on the front porch at night and swat mosquitoes.

Sometimes I watch my neighbor from the second floor guest room where I peek through the curtains, hardly moving them really, and kneel down on a thick pillow with my elbows resting on the sill. I feel it’s natural to want to know what another person does all day long. Besides being a lesbian, I wondered if Mawi had some crazy habit like

dressing up like a priest. I read about that in *National Enquirer*. Some woman dressed up as a priest in Billings, Montana, and tried to hear confessions at church. She called herself Father Toni.

One day I got Mawi or Mari's *Home Improvement* magazine by mistake and had to put it in her mailbox. I rummaged through her other mail but there wasn't anything good. I'd ordered binoculars from LL Bean and couldn't wait for them to arrive so I could see through her sheer curtains. It would help fill the days until Wilfred came to his senses.

After the binoculars came, I found out that every night after the eleven o'clock news, Mawi sits at her kitchen table, drinks a cup of tea and smokes a cigarette. She rinses out her cup and saucer, runs the cigarette under the tap, then puts it in a paper towel. After that she throws it in the wastebasket, the kind you step on and the top flies open.

On weekends, soldier girl visits and they sit together at the table smoking and talking. One time I was up in the guestroom kneeling on my pillow, watching them smooch at the table. I swear to God soldier girl almost swallowed Mari's head. Then they went upstairs and I couldn't see what they did after that.

I miss Wilfred a lot. But frankly, I'm really not interested in making new friends at my age or in some guy who's looking for a mother. Besides, I want to stay available for Wilfred. On the other hand, if a George Clooney look-alike showed up selling Jesus, I could be persuaded to drop a few pounds and get a bikini wax. I think I'd wear the Liz for George, I've got a feeling he likes brunettes.

The next time I heard from Wilfred was three weeks later. I'd been sweeping the backstairs in my denim mini skirt and when I walked in the house I saw the light flashing.

“Hello Ida Mae. It’s me Wilfred. I’ve decided to move to Kansas and buy a small farm. I’d like to come by the house Sunday and say good-bye, if that’s okay with you.”

Goodbye? For good? I was stunned. What happened to the studio apartment? I felt like I’d been hit over the head with a bat and swallowed a handful of dust. All I’d heard from Wilfred was a check in the mail since the last time he came over. I called him sometimes late at night but hung up when he answered.

I dialed his number and got his machine.

“Hello Wilfred, it’s Ida Mae. As if you didn’t know my voice. Anyway, so you’re moving to Kansas? My goodness, Wilfred.” I paused thinking of something I could say that wouldn’t sound desperate. “Well, if you’d like to come for supper, I could make something.” I hesitated while I tried to swallow. “I could make maybe a meatloaf or franks and beans with some nice warm brown bread or something. Let me know so I can go to the grocery store. Okay. Goodbye. Call me back. Okay. Bye, Wilfred.”

I looked out the window at the brick patio that Wilfred had made so long ago. Kansas was a long way away. How could he go that far away when he still loved me? Especially since I was starting a new diet next week. I’d even made an appointment with my dentist to get my tooth fixed. He couldn’t just walk out of my life like this, it didn’t make sense. I had to do something to stop him. Wilfred had always thought he was smarter than me, but I wasn’t as dumb as he thought. He used to love jigsaw puzzles and instead of talking to me he’d spend hours at the dining room table bent over the damn things. He didn’t even say thank you when I made him coffee and served Nilla Wafers. I sat down to watch but he said I was jiggling the table. After he’d gone to bed, I took

Jefferson's nose from the Mount Rushmore puzzle. He went crazy looking for it but I've still got it hidden in the bottom of my jewelry box.

Kansas. What the hell was he up to? First it was the floozy, then the studio apartment, and now Kansas. Wilfred didn't know what he wanted.

I wandered from room to room, rearranging things then looked out the window to see what Mawi was up to. Her and soldier girl were just getting in her car. I needed to get my mind off Wilfred and decided to go over there after they left and check things out.

It took me longer than I thought to get to the backyard and climb the small hill behind the house. I felt a little dizzy when I got to the top but sure enough, I could see straight into the bedroom with my binoculars. If I came back at night maybe I could see them having sex! I'd always wondered how other people had sex. I used to feel like I was paying the gas bill. I wondered if that meant I was a lesbian? I laughed nervously all the way home. And Wilfred thought he had an exciting life.

When I got in the house I called Enzo's Pizza and talked in my Marilyn voice. "Hi. I know I sound just like Marilyn but it's me Ida Mae."

"Well I thought Marilyn'd come back from the grave! What can I do for you Ida Mae?" asked Enzo.

I giggled. "I'd like a large pizza, with onions, garlic, pepperoni, and sausage. And can you deliver that to 4 Larch Road? Thank you so much."

After lunch, I checked on Mawi and saw her and soldier girl carrying a bag of groceries, trying to get in the front door. I wondered what was in the bag. Probably cabbage leaves and beetroots for that soup the Ruskie's make. I hadn't made soup in years but Wilfred used to love my beef stew.

That night I waited until after they had their cigarette and tea then I dressed in black jeans and a black sweater. A full moon like a movie camera lit up the yard as I slid against the side of her house. I tripped on some rocks going up the hill, but I had a perfect view of the bedroom because they hadn't pulled the shades down and the light was on. Panting, I sat down on a low thick tree branch.

I raised my binoculars and saw Mawi standing in her bra and panties. Soldier girl was topless and for a big woman her breasts were small. I must have moved because before I knew it the branch snapped and I tumbled forward and slid down the hill. I screamed and tried to get up, but every time I got to my knee I fell over. By this time, Mawi and soldier girl had come outside and I thought they were going to hurt me. "What the fuck you are doing?" asked soldier girl.

Mawi said, "It is neighbor Mrs. Jacquith."

I was shaking when I finally got back on my feet. "I'm very sorry," I said. "I thought my cat got out and came over here."

"Bazdmeg," said the soldier.

"Thank you," I said.

Then I limped across the street as fast as I could.

When I got home I was all wound up. Mawi's girlfriend had scared me. I was thinking about Wilfred and what would happen to me if he moved away for good.

By dawn, when I still couldn't fall asleep, I got up and made coffee. I peeked through the curtains wondering if Mawi and soldier girl believed my story about the cat. I'd been pretty quick with that one. Wilfred called back around nine but said no to dinner.

“Thank you, Ida just the same but I’ve too much to do before I leave. I’ll be over around three o’clock. Okay?”

“I guess. I still can’t believe you’re moving, Wilfred. It seems so sudden.”

“Actually, it’s not. I used to talk about moving to the Midwest to all that wide-open space, maybe have a small farm and live off the land.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well. I’ll see you around three o’clock.” Wilfred said.

He sounded so happy I felt like punching him. Instead, I went into the living room and took the picture of us on the pier at Old Orchard Beach in Maine and bashed it against the mantle.

Wilfred looked like a twit in his cut-off jeans, Birkenstock sandals, and wool socks reaching kneecaps that looked like they needed facelifts. His thin gray hair was parted from the top of his left ear up over his bald spot and down to his right ear where it looked like it was plastered to his head with rubber cement. The Grateful Dead T-shirt with the teeny holes in the armpit was the topper.

I’d taken pains to look casual yet elegant. I had on white linen pants and an oversized red silk blouse with a wide silver belt. I wore the Marilyn wig with silver hoops and a pair of red slippers. Then I applied bright red lipstick, going outside the lines to make my lips look bigger.

Wilfred jumped when I opened the door.

“What the hell?” he said looking me up and down.

“Fuck you, Wilfred. If you’re going to make fun of me then you can turn around and march right out the door!”

“Why do you need to use the F word?” he said.

“Emphasis, Wilfred. Are you coming in or are you going to stand there on the stoop like an encyclopedia salesman?”

Wilfred stepped into the hall. “I wanted to say good-bye and get the camping equipment from the attic. I don’t suppose you’ll be using it anymore?”

“You never know,” I said, thrusting my shoulder out, trying to be flirtatious.

Wilfred gave me a strange look and walked into the living room.

“I see you’re still wearing your wigs,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Wilfred shrugged and sat down. He leaned over and folded his hands between his knees.

“Can I get you some lemonade, Wilfred? I made some an hour ago so it should be nice and cold.”

“No nothing, thank you.” The doorbell rang. “Were you expecting someone?”

“Well, no but I’ve been involving myself more with neighborhood activities,” I said.

I opened the door and Mawi and soldier girl were standing on the front stairs. I gasped when I saw my binoculars in Mawi’s hand. Soldier girl was peering at me like she wasn’t sure if it was me or not. Last night I’d been wearing my Liz. Wilfred came up behind me and leaned over my shoulder trying to see who was there. I tried to block him but he moved forward extending his hand.

“Hello, I’m Wilfred Jacquith. Are you the new neighbor?”

“Yes. Mari Bashmet and this is Petra Harkov.”

“How do you do.” Turning to me Wilfred asked, “Aren’t you going to invite them in?”

“Come in,” I said curtly.

“No,” said Petra. “We are going out.”

“Yes,” said Mari, holding out the binoculars. “We came to give binoculars she left in back yard last night.”

“What?” asked Wilfred.

“Never mind, Wilfred. Go sit in the living room,” I said.

But Petra wouldn't let it go. “I'll husband what you did.”

“Never you mind. Thank you for the binoculars,” I said trying to shut the door.

“What's going on here?” asked Wilfred.

“Your wife spy on Mari and me in bedroom.”

“Oh Ida,” Wilfred said.

“Okay, that's enough,” I said. “You people need to leave.” I shut the door.

Wilfred looked at me. “What is *wrong* with you?”

“Shut up. There's two sides to every story and I can't go into my side right now.” I lowered my eyes and said, “I don't want to hurt anyone.” I guided him into the living room. “Please – sit down.”

Wilfred sat down in his old chair, looking depressed.

“How about some of that lemonade now?” I asked.

“I don't want your lemonade, Ida. I don't want anything to do with you.”

“What?”

“I want to end this relationship. I want a divorce.”

Divorce? I'll be a divorcee? Oh God. I took a deep breath, trying to stay composed.

“Now Wilfred, don't go making any quick decisions,” I said

swallowing, my heart hammering and my face burning like a fireball.

“How could you spy on the neighbor like that?” he asked, looking at me as if I’d stabbed a kitten. “Don’t you have any decency?”

“I told you, you don’t know the whole story.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re only going to lie to me like you did when you started that petition to keep that Iranian family out of town, telling everyone they were recruiting terrorists from our daycare centers.”

“That was different, Wilfred. I was being patriotic.”

“You’re out of control Ida Mae and I want no part of it anymore. It’s time we made our separation permanent.

“I see,” I said, but not really. I was sweating like a mechanic and the word divorcee kept ringing in my head. I could feel the fried pastrami I’d had for lunch creeping up my throat. It took everything I had to remain calm.

“Are you planning on remarrying?” I asked, burping. “Pardon me.”

“No.”

I thought about crying, begging him to stay. But then I thought of Jackie Kennedy and what she would do.

“So how does this work?” I asked. “You move to Kansas and what, we do this all by mail?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“I see,” I said. He’d thought it all out, the bastard, probably had a self-addressed stamped envelope in his pocket.

And then I had another idea. “I must say Wilfred. It’s one thing to want to spread your wings, but divorce is an entirely different matter.”

“I’m sorry. I need to make a clean break.”

“Naturally, I’ll want more money,” I said.

“Why do you need more money? I’ve been very generous with you, Ida.”

“Well, I wasn’t too sure where things were headed, but now I’ll need to get myself a good lawyer and make sure I get everything I deserve.”

“Now let’s try and do this amicably. I don’t want it to get messy.”

“Oh, it’s going to get messy, Wilfred,” I said, looking away. “You can’t just walk out on me and expect me to go along with everything *you* want. I have a stake in all this too,” I said, swooping my arm around the room.

“Well, it’s still fifty-fifty in Massachusetts. You’re not going to get any more than you’re entitled to.”

“We’ll see, Wilfred,” I said.

Wilfred exhaled like it was all too much for him. “I’m going up to get the camping gear in the attic,” he said.

I nodded and put the lamp on, my hands shaking. My outfit, the calm demeanor, the scare tactic, none of it had worked. He was never coming back. I couldn’t think straight and felt like I was going to faint.

A minute later I heard him yelling from the top of the stairs, “Ida Mae! Where are the poles that go to the tent? It’s not with the other stuff.”

“How the hell should I know?” I hollered back. Like I’m going to help him leave.

“Well would you mind getting off your fat ass and helping me look?”

Fat ass? Is that what he’d just said? I couldn’t believe he’d be that hurtful. I’d stood by him through that whole Vera thing and waited while he acted like a fool. Whenever he came over I tried to be friendly and go out of my way to have something he liked. I could’ve

thrown something at him when he made that crack about my tooth. But I didn't. I stood up, opened the drawer of the end table and then marched to the staircase, seething. The attic door was open and I could hear Wilfred banging around up there.

I'd never been so mad at him, even on our honeymoon when he laughed at my thighs. Did he stick up for me in front of the Ruskie's like I would have done for him? No! All he ever does is criticize me. So I've made a few mistakes in my life. Who hasn't? When I reached the top landing I paused to catch my breath still holding on to the banister.

"It's a miracle you can even make it up here," said Wilfred shaking his head from the top of the attic stairs.

I looked up at him through a yellow haze of dust and mites. Then I raised my eyebrows and smiled. Wilfred looked at me oddly. Still smiling, I pulled the keys from the pocket of my pants, stepped back, and locked the attic door.

"What the hell are you doing Ida?" he screamed, his words muffled by the thick oak door. I could hear him pounding against it, but the house was old with good bones and the two small windows in the attic were double paned and painted shut. No one would ever hear him.

I was still smiling as I slowly walked back down the stairs. In a few days Wilfred would settle down. And then I wouldn't hear him at all. Laughing, I went into the kitchen and turned the oven on to 350°. I was dying for a bacon meatloaf. □