

The Rosemary Matrons

Why is dying so complicated, Cheney Curtlow queried aloud.

The old man basked in the late-morning sunrays that penetrated the window. No other place, in his mind, could match the splendor of his farm in spring—the verdurous, almost fluorescent, drape of land that unfurled before him, the cherry trees that popped with pink blossoms, and the rollicking brook that splashed with vernal rainwater.

For Cheney, spring blended exhilaration with promise and ecstasy into an intoxicating cocktail. Once upon a time it did, that is. Now, death is near, and there was unfinished business.

Out of the corner of his eye, in the paddock closest to the stone barn, grazed the only two horses that remained on his farm, Benenden Blue and Majorca. Unable physically to do the everyday tasks necessary to care for the mares, Cheney long ago resigned himself to once-daily visits.

He heaved himself from the chair, gained his balance, and moved slowly away from the sunrays. Before he could fully straighten his rheumatic back, a tall man with grizzled temples appeared in the doorway.

“Are you ready for your walk?” questioned the younger man.

Addison held Cheney’s arm gently and shepherded his shuffling charge out of the house and to the wrought-iron bench near the paddock fence. He handed Cheney a Ziploc containing rough-chopped carrots and apples, spun on his heel, and walked back to the house.

Familiar with the routine, the mares, one gray and one bay, ambled to the fence in search of treats. As he dug into the bag with trembling hands, Cheney spoke softly to the mares, his friends. He flattened his hands and offered the morsels. As the coarse whiskers and velvety skin of the mares’ muzzles brushed his palms, joy filled his soul.

Addison entered the house through the kitchen, where Faye was pitting cherries.

"Pie?"

"Cobbler, in fact." In her late forties, Faye had been serving up meals for Cheney for nearly a decade. In the kitchen, the handsome woman, with steel hair pulled tautly into a bun, was always pleasant, though never chatty, which is how she caught Addison off-guard.

"What does he say to them?" Faye asked Addison cautiously, catching a glimpse of Cheney on the bench as she jostled and rinsed the cherries in the sink.

"I don't know," pondering the question in his mind. "I don't stick around to eavesdrop."

"The idea of talking to them like he does seems a bit *rum*," Faye remarked, as she eyed Addison suspiciously.

"*Rum*?" Addison teased. "Another one of your Cockney expressions?"

"Odd, out of the ordinary. That is what I mean."

Addison leaned toward Faye, kissed a pink cheek, and whispered in her ear. "I don't find it *rum* at all." He smiled mischievously and fended off a sharp elbow from Faye.

At noon Addison collected Cheney from his wrought-iron perch. As he descended the steps that led from the kitchen, he could hear the muttering of the gentleman, a mad gentleman if he were to believe Faye. As he rounded the corner of the stone house, the triumvirate of friends was just as he had left it. Cheney stroked the forehead of each mare with a different hand, the mares lapping up the attention with half-closed eyes.

Addison intentionally scuffed the bottom of his loafers on the stones to alert Cheney of his presence. Despite the noisy approach, Addison distinctly heard Cheney say, "Yes, I've got it all figured out."

"Lunch is ready."

"I'm ready, too," the old man said. Addison sensed a calmness, perhaps a resignation, in the old man's voice.

By the time Addison had escorted Cheney into the dining room and situated him at the head of the table, Faye had finished setting out an incredible spread of food. As usual, the table was set for three, a place each for Addison and Faye.

Faye hustled into the kitchen to grab a pitcher of iced tea.

"Hurry, Faye. I had a moment with the mares that I wish to share with you."

Addison slid a chair from under the table, and Faye dropped gently into the seat. He circled the table and sat opposite Faye.

"As you're aware, I've been taking my time dying. I don't necessarily wish to die, but it's inevitable, I suppose," Cheney began.

"Oh, Mr. Curtlow," interrupted Faye, "I'm not sure I care to listen." She fumbled for words. "To talk about this makes me feel uneasy."

Undeterred, he continued. "Before today I couldn't let go of this life because I've been unsure about what to do with the mares. You see, they're special to me." Cheney paused to spoon some lima beans onto his plate.

Addison took advantage of this lull and asked the obvious question. "You've owned many Thoroughbreds. If you don't mind me asking, what distinguishes these two from all the others?"

Before Addison asked that question, Cheney had not intended to delve that deeply, that painfully into the past. He settled on a truthful, though not entire, answer.

"Benenden Blue and Majorca are two of the best race mares I ever bred. In 1978, they raced one-two in the Oaks. Most exhilarating for me is the dead heat they finished in for the Eclipse Award voting for Champion Three-Year-Old Filly. No breeder even dreams of that."

Cheney looked at the blank faces of his dinner companions. He had slipped, with amazing ease, into babbling about his horses' accolades and had lost his audience entirely; he needed to get the train back on the tracks, as it were.

"They were great horses, the best I ever bred. And they produced winners, the hallmark of superior mares." His eyes, though no longer the vivid blue of his youth, sparkled.

"A few minutes ago, you mentioned a moment with the mares?" Addison questioned, curious enough to hasten the conversation.

Cheney looked long and hard at Addison and Faye and then announced, "Of course. I want the two of you to care for the mares after I die. After all, you are a couple, aren't you?" Not waiting for an answer to that question, he asked another, "What's for dessert?"

Addison opened his mouth, as if he was going to respond to Cheney's proclamation, but he couldn't find the proper words. Faye looked over the tabletop to Addison, waiting for him to say something apt, something to ease the tensiity.

He finally found his voice. "Cherry cobbler, I believe. Right, Faye?"

"Yes." A sense of relief bathed her, and she rose from her chair and set off for the kitchen.

When Faye returned to the dining room, the conversation had turned, to her satisfaction, to finding a rose gardener. Nothing more was said about fulfilling Cheney's wishes of looking after the mares or, more embarrassingly, Cheney's knowledge of the relationship between Addison and Faye.

"Addison, help me to my room, won't you?" The dutiful Addison led Cheney to his suite and then fine-tuned the volume on a bedside radio, leaving Cheney in the room to relish a Baroque piece by Bach.

Addison returned to the kitchen. "I wonder how long he's known about us?" Faye stopped scooping leftovers into Tupperware, looked at Addison, and shrugged. "If I dared a guess, long before we ever acted on our feelings!"

Addison remained quiet, but Faye broke the silence.

"What about the mares, Addy? How will we get along? How can we say no to Mr. Curtlow after all he's done?" Faye asked. After taking a breath, she continued, "Where shall we stable them?"

Do you know of any boarding stables near here? What a kerfuffle he's. . ." Addison interrupted the flow.

"Kerfuffle?" A confused Addison cocked an eyebrow.

"A fuss," explained Faye, "What a fuss he's created with all of this talk of dying."

"I think we should talk about it again at dinner, if Mr. Curtlow is up to it," Addison resolved.

"I have errands now. Cleaners, post office, the like."

"Well, think about what you're going to say to Mr. Curtlow this evening for you won't hear so much as a peep from me." And then, refocusing sharply on domestic duties, she said, "I think fresh-cut flowers, dahlias perhaps, would look nice on the table tonight. Will you?"

"Of course," Addison assented. He grabbed his cap and keys, and he left.

As Faye rinsed dishes, she spied through the windowpane the mares loafing under a giant oak. Benenden Blue and Majorca are unusual names, she thought to herself, and somehow familiar.

Cheney's eyes popped open, and he felt strangely serene. Such tranquility, he hoped, would continue beyond his final breath. He lay on the bed in silent contemplation. Cheney was proud of himself, for he had devised a solution to the single roadblock keeping him from eternal peace. Though Addison and Faye stopped short of a commitment, he took it as good omen that they didn't nix immediately the idea of overseeing the care of the mares. Gentle cajoling may seal the deal.

He looked at his wristwatch, nearly five o'clock. His nap, which usually lasted no longer than two hours, had stretched into the early evening. He chalked the somnolence up to many recent restless nights.

Seated again in the dining room, enjoying lighter fare for the late meal, Cheney asked, "Have you had time to consider my request?" He looked at both of them. "It would do my heart well to know the mares will continue to lead quiet lives here."

"Here?" Addison pounced.

“Why, where else would you and Faye live with the mares if not here?” quizzed Cheney.
 “The two of you would move here and oversee their care.”

“Well, Mr. Curtlow, that was one of the things that worried us.” He looked to Faye for encouragement, and she encouraged him with widening eyes and a slight nod. “Though you’ve always been generous to us, Faye and I don’t feel as though we will have the means to take care of them.” Addison lowered his eyes in disappointment. Faye sat rigidly across from Addison playing with the hem of the tablecloth and staring into the ruffly petals of the dahlias.

“No money.” Cheney repeated, this time more as a question, “No money?” And then he began to chortle—deep laughter, the kind that erupts involuntarily from the belly.

Addison and Faye eyed one another curiously. Faye raised an eyebrow to Addison as if to say, “I told you he was rum.” But Cheney gave neither a chance to speak. “Why this farm will be yours when I die. All of it, yours. I’ve no relatives to speak of . . . but you.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Faye rallied in protest, “Oh, Mr. Curtlow. We can’t assume the responsibility of owning this farm. There’s so much history. There’s so much we don’t know. I mean Addy . . . Addison has been in service his entire life; what does he know about maintaining a farm, and no ordinary farm at that but *this place*? And I am just a farmgirl, a farmgirl turned cook. Why, I’ve never stepped foot into that barn.”

Addison was no help; he said nothing, still reeling at the revelation. Cheney just smiled as Faye rambled on. Such was the speed of her chatter that he couldn’t process it all. He did, however, catch the last bit. “And another thing, Mr. Curtlow. Those mares’ names, Benenden Blue and Majorca, quite unusual. Who named them?” Finally, Faye paused, the verbal stream dammed.

Cheney didn’t expect this. Avoidance was his immediate thought, but he settled on vagueness. “Excuse me,” he said.

Faye repeated, “Who named the mares?”

He never knew the quiet woman to be nosy, so this interest must be genuine. Before he could compose an answer, she continued her analysis. “Benenden Blue and Majorca are herbs, kinds of rosemary. Did you know?”

Cheney had freed himself from much worry already today. Why not set free this truth as well, he mused.

“I’ve never spoken of my wife, Margaret. I imagine you both know of her but it would be impossible for you to know her, know her soul. Margaret loved horses . . . from a distance. She wasn’t as passionate about them as I am. Aside from her involvement in church and a few women’s groups, what she lived to do was garden, though she wasn’t particularly interested in tending beds of annuals and perennials.”

“After a few springs of nothing spectacular to show for her efforts, Margaret eventually gave up and hired a proper gardener. With his help, she began fiddling with vegetables and eventually herbs—rosemary, as you’ve mentioned, thyme, dill, marjoram, basil, sesame, and the like. She had far more fun raising herbs. She toiled in the dirt, and I played in the stables when my work allowed. When the time came to name the yearling Thoroughbreds in 1976, I passed off the chore to her and thought little more of it. The registration certificates arrived by post on a spring day, and I found that Margaret had chosen the most unusual lot of names for them. I could hardly pronounce some of them.”

Cheney smiled at the memory and took stock of the listeners. The pair was enraptured. He decided to end the explanation there, concluding he more than answered Faye’s question.

Faye, entirely perspicacious but usually reserved in fragile matters, fought off the temptation to inquire further about his wife. In less than a moment, though, she lost the fight and blurted, “Well, what came of Mrs. Curtlow?”

From across the table and over the dahlias, Addison leered annoyingly.

Cheney noticed Addison's expression, so he answered quickly, "Oh, it's a fair question." He drained the Chardonnay from its glass. "Margaret died in a car accident. We were in Louisville, driving back to the hotel. A drunk collided with us. The car somersaulted into a building and came to a standstill on its top. Only one survivor." He held his index finger in the air to punctuate the last sentence.

Faye shuttered at the imagery.

"I awoke with Margaret's head on my lap. The scarlet toque, fashionably askew on her head earlier in the day, had slid over her face. Blood seeped onto my lap. I couldn't bear the thought of her face, possibly smashed beyond recognition, so I never looked." Tears suffused Cheney's eyes but none streaked a pale cheek. Faye was not so fortunate; tears tumbled liberally from her red-rimmed eyes.

The cool silence of the room was broken by the peals of a grandfather clock.

"Is this day, May 5, the anniversary of Mrs. Curtlow's death?" Addison asked hesitantly.

"Perceptive, Addison. Not only this day but this hour." A slight suspension in verse and then, "But there's more."

"That day had been extraordinary for us. On that day, the first Friday of May, Benenden Blue and Majorca raced in the Oaks, and Margaret and I found ourselves surrounded by friends in the winner's circle. As breeders, it was enthralling. No two people were happier. And then the horrible accident. Dreams fulfilled, dreams shattered."

A moment of silence followed. In a flash, Addison suddenly understood his desires for the mares. "And the mares remind you of Mrs. Curtlow?" Addison offered. Cheney shook his head and said, "Yes, that's why I care so deeply about their future."

"Each of the mares, in her own way, puts me in mind of Margaret. There is Benenden Blue with her long eyelashes splayed away from dark, soulful eyes. She is standoffish—not out of arrogance but of shyness. Once her trust is gained, there is nothing she wouldn't do. Anyone that

knew my Margaret could vouch for her bashfulness, her brightness of eye, her trusting nature. And then there's Majorca, with black tendrils trailing down her forehead. Her turn of foot and persistence on the racetrack were unmatched. If you knew my Margaret, you would describe her raven hair piled atop her head with a few locks escaping capture, her resolve in seeing a job to the end," Cheney reminisced. His voice trailed off.

"Listen to me prattle. The mares have no commercial value so I cannot sell them, nor would I. I couldn't possibly give them away to a university or a retirement program, and euthanizing them would hardly ease my mind. I must know that they're being taken care of properly, here. Before I die, I must knot these loose ends. The end will come easier," Cheney said forthrightly.

"I cannot abide by this talk," Faye sputtered, half choking. In a reenactment of her dashing departure earlier in the day, she sprang from her chair, grabbed a handful of dishes, and headed to the kitchen.

"Grimness disagrees with her." Addison said.

"Never mind her. Tell me you'll look after the farm and the mares after I die. Who else can I appeal to?" Cheney pled.

"It would be our pleasure, Cheney."

Cheney's thin lips stretched into a smile, and he fell back into his chair. "Thank you." He sighed heavily and asked to be taken to his bedroom.

Cheney lay in bed that evening breathing in fits and starts. With a shudder and a gasp, he exhaled one final breath just before midnight.

Addison found Cheney the next morning. Before calling for an ambulance, he rushed to the kitchen to inform Faye. She was stooped over the countertop, slicing and dicing carrots and apples, when he spoke the words. "He's gone." She turned to him with a sallow expression, sat on the kitchen stool, and wept.

Addison quietly took over the work at the chopping block. When he was finished, he made his way to the paddock. Benenden Blue and Majorca, in usual slow fashion, strode to the visitor to collect their treats. Not knowing exactly where to begin, Addison murmured tentatively, "Well, girls, now it's the four of us."

From the kitchen window, Faye spied the trio through tears and smiled ever so gently.