

Saving Women

by Joan Sauro, CSJ

This story begins in a rose garden and a liquor store. From there it journeys to a crumbling English manor, a well appointed Russian boudoir, and a suburban home not too distant from my own. Spanning two centuries, two novels and our family album, the tale that unfolds is a timeless one, like the women at its core, like the need for mercy.

This is the story of three women whose lives intersect. One asks for life, days enough to see her son graduate. Another asks, not for life, but for mercy. Having grown old on vengeance, a third woman is unable to give mercy, and so finds it withheld from her.

It is said that at some point in our lives, the journey becomes more important than the arrival. I am not at that point. I have every hope that one day all of us will arrive at the house where mercy dwells.

Miss Havisham—Satis House, England, 1860

Satis House. Enough House. The name is ironic, given the sad falling off. The garden reeks of ruined scabbage. Melon and cucumber frames lie strewn among dusty hats, boots and broken bottles, while a grapevine tangles with weeds, one of which looks like a battered saucepan. Making an effort to rise above the wreckage, a single box tree has turned the color of burnt pudding. Grass grows in every crack of the broken courtyard, and the whole area surrounding Miss Havisham's house is rank, a sour reminder of better days.

For more than a century, Miss Havisham has lived in Satis House, in the very room she inhabited the day her intended sent the fateful word, canceling their wedding even as she was dressing for it. Twenty to nine it was and she stopped all of the clocks in the house to mark the time of betrayal. She still wears her bridal clothes which have yellowed and are near disintegration even as Miss Havisham wastes away inside them, shrunk to skin and bones. Bridal flowers circle her hair, her white hair, crowned with withered blooms.

This is the unforgettable image blazoned on my teenage sensibility in Mother Athanasia's English class. Now, many years later, I come with a peace offering.

The room I am ushered into is as I remember it, airless and candle-lit. Rats rattle behind the panels. Miss Havisham still sits at a long table set for a feast except that fungus and mould have eaten whatever food the spiders and rats have left. She points to a black mound of fungus. "It's a great cake," she tells me. "A bride-cake. Mine. Sharper teeth than rats' have gnawed at me."

She bangs the table with her crutched stick, so that I jump. "When the ruin is complete," she adds, "they will lay me dead, in my bride's dress on this bride's table." She holds the stick against her heart and lowers her eyes as if viewing her own dead body.

Even as she looks, I cautiously approach the table, get a good hold of the rotten tablecloth, and with one swift yank sweep the whole decrepit mess into the filthy room. Then I shake out my mother's beautiful, hand crocheted tablecloth, so that it billows lightly and settles neatly before Miss Havisham. I have baked her a delicate Silver White Cake with fluffy white icing which an old Betty Crocker cookbook has assured me is an elegant dessert for a special occasion. Over the top of the cake I have sprinkled edible, pink petals from my rose garden.

I cut Miss Havisham a generous slice and serve her on my finest china. She lifts a piece, pauses in mid taste, then devours the slice and asks for more, and more, like one long starved.

One by one the clocks in the house click, chime and rise from slumber.

Christine—Syracuse, New York, 1995

The neighbor in back walks across his well-kept yard into my sister-in-law Christine's where, unbidden, he drops quietly to his knees before her impatiens. It is the only prayer he can give her, to weed and trim, water and mulch her blossoms. Pink and white, they curve around the dark green bushes like so many bridal bouquets.

And who is my neighbor? Why she is, of course, she who lies dying in the family room whose nearby windows he courteously avoids. He has come to tend the gift she gave, to see that something of her remains. *Her remains.* That is another window he avoids, the grammar of death, there on his knees in a bed of flowers.

Most of the family's living is done in the back of the house, starting with the dining room table filled with cereal boxes, scattered school books and neatly folded laundry. This opens directly into a small kitchen with table and benches, and finally, into the long, narrow living room with a fireplace at the end. Family pictures line the mantel, many of which I have taken. Christine and my brother John in bridal clothes look radiant in one. All around, her embroidered handwork warms the walls.

She has had a skylight carved into the roof and this early June afternoon the heavens are showing clear, unmitigated blue. The sun, though, has moved elsewhere leaving much of the room to wrestle with shadows.

But the skylight is where it belongs, directly over the hospital bed in which she is lying, so that whatever light and mercy heaven has to bestow filters down over her. It should be plenteous. She is, after all, called *Christine*, as close as a woman can get to *Christ*.

She lies uneasily on her right side. Every inhale is labored, every exhale is a tremulous, tortured moan. "I'm a survivor," she had told us. "I intend to beat this thing."

What she has managed to do is hold the cancer at bay for eighteen months. It does not seem right that at forty she should be dying in the living room.

Anna—St. Petersburg, Russia, 1870

Anna Karenina is dying in her bedroom. She has just given birth to her illegitimate child and is paying the ultimate price. She moans and thrashes about in her bed. She points to the tasteless flowers in the wallpaper and asks where her son is, her little Seryozha who used to bring her violets. Where are the bunches of soft blue violets.

I first met Anna Karenina at the St. Petersburg train station where she was returning from Moscow. There was a tragedy that day, some poor soul had fallen onto the tracks and his mangled body was carried into the small station. That day Anna Karenina met Count Vronsky and their own tragedy began. Leo Tolstoy knows well what he intends, foreshadowing the day when Anna will throw herself into the path of the oncoming train. Ever since that day, the sound of the train has haunted me. Now I mean to put an end to it, to give Anna a decent demise.

I have brought her author the finest vodka money can buy and pour him a shot. Leo Tolstoy drinks and writes at a small desk in the corner of Anna Karenina's boudoir where he has an unobstructed view of the scene: the doctor and his colleagues; Count Vronsky, sitting apart and weeping, his hands over his face; Alexei, the offended husband, kneeling bedside; and the dying Anna, her face flushed and shining, her small hand bare of rings. She twists the corner of her blanket anxiously, so Alexei takes Anna's hand and tries to speak. She looks at him with a rapturous tenderness he has never seen before. "I know I'm dying now," she says. "Heavy weights press down like steel."

Alexei drops his head on her arm and sobs like a child. She embraces him and says, "All I need is

forgiveness, I want nothing more, nothing.”

Leo Tolstoy drinks his vodka and listens to Anna’s final request. He hears her tell Vronsky to come close and look at her husband’s face. “He’s a saint,” Anna says. Then to her husband, “Give him your hand. Forgive him.” Alexei gives his hand even as he weeps. Impossible as it seems, he is at once profoundly disturbed and profoundly happy.

“Thank God, thank God,” Anna says. “Now everything is ready.”

And so it would seem. Anna and Vronsky are duly forgiven. Alexei is duly ennobled. It is the moral high point of the story by an author who prides himself on his orthodoxy

So why does Leo Tolstoy sit like some God Almighty, pondering whether everything is ready or not, whether to punish Anna for her adultery and throw her onto the railroad tracks or allow her to die giving life and forgiven. Which will it be—God of justice or God of mercy?

Anna moves in and out of delirium even as her creator moves in and out of mercy.

“The end is soon,” the doctor announces. “She has puerperal fever. Ninety-nine percent of the time it is fatal.”

“The end is soon,” my brother says over the phone. “Would you tell the family?”

After quick calls, I race over to my parents, console my father who is himself in bed wondering why God doesn’t take him instead, buckle my mother in the car and speed through traffic. My mother is uncommonly still, gathering herself for the oncoming storm. Her small feet are flat on the car floor, sucking up strength from all the bumpy roads she has traveled.

Tenderly, she kisses Christine’s cheek, hugs her son long and hard, and joins Christine’s mother five feet away on the couch. The mothers sit with arms around each other, listening to Christine groan, her spirit trying to shake loose of her body. Her left arm bangs the bed, so I take her hand and massage her arm gently, up and down, softly. Tears fall on her arm and one long strand from my nose, so that her mother brings me a wad of tissue.

Her arm is still warm, but her face is pale and lifeless, her head wrapped in light blue terry cloth. I rub over the freckles of her arm which I had never noticed before, like motes of days unremarked, days we will never have again. Her hand is ringless, her gold band hanging under my brother’s shirt. Over and over I soothe, *Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.* Out of a dark distance comes the melancholy cry of a train, a blossoming black orchid staining the air.

Shaking, I lean into her ear and call her name. “Christine. Christine. Everyone in this room loves you. We love you.” Close on the words of love and wrapped in them, I force myself to say, “When you’re ready, Christine, walk towards the light.” I keep massaging and weeping and saying *walk towards the light*, until her arm finally rests and her breathing slows.

The mothers stiffen and grip each other’s hands. I join them on the couch so that now there are three grieving women. My brother hovers close. Their son Brian comes in and out, bears what he can and then quietly joins his friends outside. Their daughter Jess huddles alone on the train which cannot arrive soon enough. Soon enough the child she carries alone will be born and named *Christine*.

Up above, the blue sky stretches over the rumbling train.

The neighbor out back rises from the garden and returns home.

My brother lifts the kidney bag hanging down the side of the hospital bed and says, “It’s empty.”

Miss Havisham crumples into a heap upon the table. With sweetness on her lips, she dies wrapped in a shroud of my mother’s fine crocheted tablecloth.

Brian borrows one of his father’s suits and a pair of dress shoes from the neighbor next door. In

clothes that seem too big, her fifteen year old son helps carry his mother's body into church.
Christine walks towards the light.
Anna Karenina walks towards the oncoming train.
Miss Havisham walks towards the Eternal Bridegroom.

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