

'Last Man Standing' Contest Entry

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Black Widow

The funeral was grand and elegant, the casket ebony with gold and ivory handles. The party gathered was a fine bunch, the ladies with flowing black dresses made of rare silks, the men with tailored jackets and expensive hats, which they held to their chests as they bowed their heads. She stood at the front of the casket, watching as the men lowered it into the ground, the priest intoning words from the holy book he held in his hands, his white robes blackened at the hems with mud. Her dress was of a fine material, a train bunched behind her, a small black hat and veil over her face, her dark brown hair twisted in an exquisite design. As the mourners began to leave, they shook her hand and offered their condolences while she solemnly nodded her head, allowing her eyes to fog and lose focus so that she might please their need for her to appear distressed.

And when all had gone away she bent down, and removed a red rose from the folds of her dress and tossed it onto the fresh grave. She whispered a poem to herself, musing silently for a second before standing up and walking to her own carriage. As she was driven away from the grave she gazed out the window towards the passing woods, the world seen through the rain on the window, but she shed no tears. The face of the buried man as he had gasped for breath and struggled madly was an image her mind did not entertain for long.

After the first time, one learned not to care so much.

She could still remember when, years earlier, she and her brother Stephen had sought refuge within the library's walls. It was there where she had discovered the magic of literature, spending entire days devouring whatever books were closest to her favorite reading chair. Her particular favorites were fairytales, in which the evil stepmother created devious plots that could only be unraveled due to the hero's bravery and skill. It did bother her though how the storyteller had been mistaken, for in life it wasn't the stepmother who was cruel, it was the father. Despite this she always loved the fantasy

world, and enjoyed it whenever Stephen, her half brother, his mother dead and hers married to their father, managed to find a new fairytale for her. But in the time they spent hiding in the library, she did more than read. In that room a more memorable event occurred than uncovering old mythology books on a dusty shelf or discovering the row of scandalous mystery novels, both of which had resulted in hours of pleasure and turned into lifelong influences. This event consisted of learning how to play a game that Stephen had presented her with, a checkered board with carefully sculpted playing pieces. He called it chess; she simply labeled it ingenious.

Learning the game consisted of numerous lectures from Stephen as he explained the logic of it, yet despite his projected voice and lengthy speeches he could do little to cover up the sounds of screaming and crashing that came from beyond the safe walls of books, serving as a constant reminder of the man their father was. But of all the things he taught her there was one that she would remember and honor her entire life.

“This,” he’d said, tapping the top of one of the pieces, “is the queen of the entire game. She’s by far the strongest and most versatile, superior in every way... never forget that.”

Years after those lessons and years before the rainy burial of her spouse, she stood in a white gown in a marble chapel, a bouquet of roses in her hands. The minister stood before her, his loud voice resounding off of the solid walls as he read from a book, speaking of the bonds of marriage. The then thirteen-year-old girl looked through her lashes at the man beside her, his hair and clothing ruffled and his face unshaven. He moved his weight from foot to foot; impatient it seemed for the entire thing to commence so that he could stagger back to the tavern from which he had just arrived. He stank of stale ale and unwashed animal, her nostrils pulled back at the odor that emanated from him, no doubt caused by the nights he’d slept in the gutter. It was not the most intelligent of unions, she thought, to be married to a man known as a visitor to brothels and other disreputable establishments. However, while waiting for the groom to arrive Stephen had pulled her aside and spoken to her, as was sometimes his habit, in the form of a logic game. He told her that like the queen piece in a game of chess, she was strong and independent, able to tackle daunting tasks. He then compared her soon to be husband to a

pawn, weak and simple, unable to accomplish much other than take blows for the other pieces. He assured his sister once again that the arrangement was temporary, placing his hand on her shoulder as assurance. She'd nodded, looked up at Stephen, the person who'd arranged the entire business, trusting in him, her brother, the one who had kept her alive all these years. Anything he thought wise would be done.

So she stood there, pushing her thumb against one of the rose's thorns as she repeated the words the holy man before her was directing her to say, turning to the man beside her whose face was unwashed, unshaven, and shone with sweat. When he took her and pressed his cracked lips against her soft ones she didn't fight.

When he staggered away, heaving the doors open and crossing the street towards the tavern, whooping happily as a tankard was rushed into his hands, she didn't react. Turning to Stephen she saw him smile and nod his approval, she had behaved correctly. With that she removed her finger from the rose and watched the blood drip onto her once pure white dress and down onto the chapel's cold floor.

Her first days, weeks and months as a wife were all the same, consisting of her spending the day reading in the library or mending her husband's clothes. They were his gift to her after he was out for days on end when would stumble loudly into the house, demanding dinner and wine, cursing to high heaven that if he wasn't immediately attended to there would be hell to pay. The man evidently lacked all social graces, though he came from a reputable family and had an extensive bank account, the true reason that the entire arrangement had been made. As the days passed she found that her original feelings of dislike for her husband were growing, and she now despised him, the bottle always in hand, the ragged and tattered clothing that she was forever mending, the unshaven face which was always beneath a layer of sweat and grime, his fingernails, some short and some long, dirt crammed beneath them. He could have cared less about her interests in poetry or novels and had often come into the library and raided the shelves using the paper to start roaring fires in his study. He reminded her of her father, and his complete disregard for everything that she held holy only assisted in his demise.

Stephen had offered the solution in the form of a small vial with a metal stopper held in place with red wax. It wasn't hard coming up with a way to give him the poison, all they did was pour it into a bottle of liquor and wait until his arrival.

When he finally stumbled into the house, drunk, shouting and cursing; he yanked his wife from her seat where she was mending his clothing and threw her in the direction of the kitchen. The bottle in his hand was nearly drained, and taking a hearty swig he emptied it, pitching it at the wall where it shattered, sending shards flying in every direction.

It would be a lie to have said that she hadn't lost some sleep over the plot that she would now put in action. The idea of killing another was odd and complex to her, though quite poetic, her ideas of famous last words springing from the literature that she so admired. She hoped, somewhat foolishly, that he would redeem himself, that in the face of death he would reach some sudden wisdom that might cause him to gain some honor in his last moments. But as she poured the liquor into a cup and walked out into the dining room, setting it before the drunken man, she knew that such thoughts were solely fantasy. If he would react at all to death it would only be through curses, anger, and threats. Her speculations were correct; his last moments spent cursing more fervently than ever before until he collapsed onto the floor. No one questioned the death of the man whose habits were well known, his downward spiral a public fact, one that very few sympathized with.

Thus Eleanor Dunn became a black widow.

In this manner they began to travel the country, new identities, papers and pasts forever being invented. She became an actress, learning to memorize her lines and repeat them so that the gossips didn't see any reason to pry further.

It had gotten to the point where she could barely keep track of how many men she'd married... had it been ten or twelve? Their faces began to blur together, though her past characters remained fresh in her mind. They'd all married a different woman yet left behind the same widow.

Now they were all in same place, beneath headstones, their lives and accomplishments forgotten, weeds creeping around their final resting place. And she,

why she was in a coach being whisked away from her latest husband who'd been killed during a robbery. Stabbed nineteen times in the chest. Tragic really...

It was there, when the other passengers had disembarked, that Stephen told her he was to be married. She'd recoiled in shock; marriage was such a villainous and pointless matter, who would actually engage in it if not only temporarily? He argued that it was time to reap what they had sown, that what she was doing was immoral, insisting, if not demanding, that she settle down and become the wife that she should have always been. As he lectured her he omitted every crime and wrongdoing he had committed, causing a phrase to enter her mind. *Like father like son*. But she'd placidly nodded, biting her tongue, and they got off and lodged in a small inn.

That night she couldn't sleep, thinking about how treacherous holy matrimony truly was. She had witnessed it; she had seen her mother victimized by her father. Stephen had recognized it too; surely he must have, for he had been the one that told her such unions were poisonous to the core. She could still recall him telling her that matrimony was the business of a fool.

So she packed her bags and waited for the coach to arrive, and when it did she entered the musty carriage and was whisked away into the night, leaving the inn's owners to scratch their head in puzzlement the next morning when they discovered one of the boarders dead in a massive pool of blood. She had no tolerance for fools.

Stephen had thought she was the queen in a game of chess, fancying himself as king. But he'd turned out to simply be a pawn, having been eliminated from the game like all the others, dying for the cause. As she planned her next exploit she smiled to herself, the game having just begun. How good it felt to always be the one that survived the betrayals and hardships, to be the last man standing.

I once spoke to a mad man,
With teeth as sweated as the down of a fat mother hen,
One black, one of tattered tin,
And from his puckered mouth escaped ramblings and profanities so fierce,

That ears would ache and ring,
And inbetween such things he spoke of,
Dreams and hopes and other impossible things