

The Mary Purse

By

Marian McCarthy



THE MARY PURSE

Perrie Spock was a girl with pale blonde hair that fell like a parted curtain on either side of her long face. At school, she was called Mortuary Perrie because her family owned the Ida Rose Funeral Home. One Friday evening last fall, Perrie's AP English teacher arrived at the intake door of the Ida Rose, dead as road kill after smashing her PT Cruiser into a log truck out on Highway 44.

Perrie looked at the corpse of Mrs. Figgart. The pretty young blonde teacher of gifted students in AP English, director of school plays and coach of the championship debate team, she now lay splayed out on the embalming table. Her bloody head perched atop her broken neck and her blonde hair fanned out around her like a halo she didn't deserve. Everybody in town would think this was a great tragedy, but Perrie knew better. The woman marked up essays with red pen, subtracted points for split infinitives and nonsequiturs. When Perrie wrote about gender bias in *Paradise Lost*, Mrs. Figgart gave her a B- because of two misspelled words and one comma splice. No comment about the thesis, the quality of thought.

Perrie learned at her mother's side to drain the bodies of blood and inject them with preservative so they would keep in an open casket. The finer people in town liked to see their dead loved ones resting in a satin-lined casket, coifed and peaceful and dressed in church clothes. Perrie's mother had the knack of fixing each dead face with a pious expression, and she taught Perrie all her secrets. She learned to match skin tones by mixing pancake makeup on an artist's palette until it was just the right shade to cover bruises, scars, and burns. She learned to plump

up sunken cheeks with a bit of putty in the mouth, and how to keep the eyes shut with a little plastic disc under each lid.

When it came to nicknames at Shylock High School, Mortuary Perrie wasn't so bad; far better than Ack-Faced Alex Werner or HardOn Hank Patterson. These names were bestowed by the sophomore alpha girl, Trista Schaller, and her pack of she-wolves, the ones at the corner table in the cafeteria. Sometimes, Trista and the she-wolves made a place at their lunch table for Perrie, but only to pump her for ghost stories or to find out if dead men get erections when rigor mortis sets in. Perrie only shrugged and giggled and pretended to know nothing at all. Truth was, she knew plenty. She'd seen the bloated blue flesh of fat men sprawled on her mother's embalming table, and she knew a jawbone sometimes cracked when her mother forced a gaping mouth shut. But Perrie knew better than to risk her family's livelihood with tales from the crypt. Tick-a-lock, never talk.

There was a new girl that year, a big Mexican girl who smelled like onion soup and didn't shave her legs. Trista's she-wolves christened her Babe the Blue Ox, but in their infinite mercy called her Babe most of the time. They thought this wittily ironic, because Babe was no babe at all, and she was brown, not blue. Perrie was ashamed, but she laughed and called the girl Babe even though she knew her real name.

They think I am coming to be sad with the rest of them, all those girls who call me Babe. Those girls, they ran me off from the lunch room because I am big and

brown and I do not smell like them. These are the girls who act in plays and sing solos in the choir and drive their own shiny cars every day. They are the ones who laugh and think I don't hear them, who flip their little fannies at the boys because they know they cannot help getting hard. They would not know what to do with that hardness, or what that hardness can make a man do. Stupid *putas*.

So now I am going to the big white house and they will be there because they want to be sad and cry and pretend they care about their dead teacher. But I am not sad. I am going because Mrs. Figgart is a thief and a bully, and I don't care if she's dead, she still has to give back what she took from me.

It was my Mary Purse.

“Not sure you should be here,” Mother said to Perrie in the embalming room. “This woman was your teacher, right?”

“I can handle it. Not to worry,” Perrie said, eager to get to work.

“All right, let's begin with the clothes,” Mother prompted, handing Perrie the heavy scissors. “She's got lots of torso damage, so I'll get the blouse. You take the skirt. Stop when you get to the underwear and I'll take over.”

Perrie nodded and cut into the waistband of Mrs. Figgart's gray pencil skirt. It was too tight at the waist, not enough room to get a clean cut without damaging the skin underneath.

Perrie moved toward the hem, then stopped midway when she saw the small slit of a pocket with something inside that made a little bump. A little rectangular bump.

Mrs. Figgart was a confiscator. Once, she had taken Perrie's green pen because she said green ink wasn't appropriate for taking notes in AP English. "If you want to be an average student, be my guest. AP students write in blue or black ink, period. No red, no purple, pink, and certainly no *green*." She held the pen up for the class to see, prompting laughs from Ryan Bishop and his geek posse. Mrs. Figgart put the pen in her desk and never returned it to Perrie. Never. She had other stuff in there, too. Little things she'd taken just because she could. The thief.

The coast was clear, Perrie knew, when she saw her mother bent over Mrs. Figgart's neckline, struggling to unfasten a cheap pearl necklace so as not to damage it. Perrie slipped her hand into the skirt pocket and snatched the small object. She slipped it into her jeans pocket, for later.

My old Aunt Jacinta gave me that Mary purse. It was Christmas Eve, after she sang Silent Night with the other sisters at the monastery. My Aunt Jacinta was a nun, an old poor woman who had dedicated her life to Jesus. For many years she was a teacher. Even in her old age, she would sit with the struggling ones who could not read and listen to them sound the words. That's how she taught me, back when the people at the school said I could not learn. She taught me, and I proved them wrong.

Old aunt Jacinta was too poor to give presents, even to Mama who is her grand niece or to my brothers who are boys or to my sister Marucha who is pretty. After Mass, we went with her to the monastery dining room to have cookies and weak coffee. Mama was so tired, and Marucha was cranky, and my brothers were getting looks for stuffing cookies into their pockets, so we didn't stay long. We each kissed our old aunt on the cheek, and I had to lean down so far because she is no bigger than a child. She put her hand on mine, and then she placed a tiny packet in my palm. "Don't tell the others. This is special for you, a secret to keep. It is mine but on this Christmas morning it becomes yours."

Babe's real name was Serena Maria de Guadalupe Contreras y Villareal. Perrie knew this because Babe worked nights at the Ida Rose with her mother, a stocky little woman named Luz. They handled the real dirty work, scrubbed the room where Mrs. Spock embalmed the bodies, cleaned the laboratory where Dr. Spock harvested eyes and kidneys for the tissue bank. They also laundered the linens soiled while caring for the dead, making even the darkest stains disappear as if by magic. They worked late into the night, long after Perrie and her family had retired to their quarters on the second floor of the Ida Rose.

Perrie also knew that Babe's real nickname was Lupe, because Luz was always saying, "Lupe, take that bleach load out of the washer. Lupe, reach up on that shelf and hand me the Pine Sol." Perrie felt ashamed that she lacked the courage to address Lupe as anything but Babe when they were at school. But it was all right, because their paths never crossed. Perrie, a

Shylock Scholar, took only the most challenging AP classes, while Babe slogged along with remedial math and reading.

Later, up in her room, Perrie looked at the tiny gray pouch she'd taken from Mrs. Figgart's pocket. It was beautiful, a tiny plastic wallet with a snap clasp and hand stitching around the edges. Inside were two tiny pictures. One was Mary wearing a dark green cloak with stars, surrounded by rays of light. The other was Mary all in light blue, with rays of light coming out of her fingers. Mystical and saint-filled, a tiny Mary purse. Nothing an ordinary AP student would be carrying around. Mrs. Figgart must have had detention duty. She knew Babe had to stay for detention and was an hour late to work yesterday. Perhaps she had stayed for detention today, too.

Perrie wanted to slide the tiny purse into the secret compartment of her jewelry box, along with a strange fishing lure she'd found on the lakeshore and a Canadian quarter she'd gotten as change from the ice cream store up in Maine, where her family went for vacation every summer.

The next day, she dressed for the Parlor, which meant a skirt, sweater and nice shoes. It was her job to greet the throng of visitors who would file in to pay their respects to Mrs. Figgart. Among them would be Trista, looking to cry on John Wainbridge's shoulder about her "very favorite" teacher. No doubt the she-wolves would file through right behind her. Perrie clasped her hair into a severe low ponytail. Today they would all see Mortuary Perrie in her natural habitat.

Hesitating at the jewelry box, she grabbed the little purse and stuck it in her skirt pocket.

Back home on Christmas morning, I go into the bathroom where I close the door to see my secret present. My heart is pounding, beating like a drum when I see that it is a tiny gray pouch, like a clutch purse made for a Barbie, with its own tiny snap. I open it and there is Our Lady who shares her name with me and who sheds light into my soul. Maria de Guadalupe, Empress of the Americas. Beside her is Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, the beautiful Mary who came to little St. Catherine when she was crying and motherless. I wash my face and hands. And I come out of that bathroom on Christmas morning knowing that I will always keep my Mary Purse with me. It is small and it's all I ever need. Then I pray to Our Lady, three Hail Mary's, and then I say, *in the name of the Immaculate Conception, I command you every unclean spirit to depart. Cease your attacks on my home, my family, on me, and on those for whom I pray.* And I pray for those bitch girls, the ones at school, because they need it. Because Our Lady has opened my heart. Because my old aunt Jacinta passed her Mary Purse to me. And then I know that this is my old aunt's last Christmas.

So my Mary Purse protects me and comforts me at all times. When Mama left Papa and he went to prison, and we came here, to Oklahoma, where a priest let us sleep in the basement. When I start school here and those bitches call me names and tell me I stink and think I am too stupid to know that they call me Babe for an ox with a blue tail. They think I do not know, but I do. And my Mary Purse gets me through.

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One day I lose my vocabulary book, and I cannot do the assignment. Each day I do not have the book, this teacher marks a check, and when you have five checks, that means detention. Detention is one hour in the study hall after school, and I have two detentions now. Coach Rammer is there the first day, with his feet on the desk, reading a Sharper Image catalog. Day two, Mrs. Figgart, a tall lady with yellow hair. She wears high heels that click click click on the floor. She walks up and down the aisles of desk the whole time, clicking her heels like a bad Flamenco dancer, her arms folded across her chest like a prison guard. She wears a gray skirt with white stripes, slim and sort of tight, but it looks good. She wears a white blouse, tucked in, and her waist is slim, but I see that she has big calves and thick ankles and this somehow makes me happy.

I am sitting there, reading about the Continental Congress in my American History book, and it is making me sleepy. So I take my Mary Purse out of my pocket and I run my finger along the stitched edges, which I am in the habit of doing when I have to stay awake, because Mary won't let me doze. All of a sudden, Mrs. Figgart is holding out her hand with her red fingernails and she says, "give me that young lady." I started to say it's my Mary Purse, but she snapped her fingers and so I just gave it to her. She stuck it in a pocket, a slit in the side of her skirt, and she says I can have it back after detention. But she gets called to the office, and she is gone. I look everywhere when detention is over, and then I see her ugly little car is gone from the parking lot and I am angry. Very, very angry.

So I am going up the steps to this big white house where I clean up after the dead. Today I go in through the front door, to that Parlor. And there is that thief Mrs. Figgart, propped up on a satin pillow, her lips painted pink and her eyes closed. She is wearing a pretty lace blouse that comes too far up her neck. The bitches are crying, handing each other Kleenexes, and some of the football boys are there, shifting their feet, and letting the girls cry on them, and I see that some of them are hard.

I pray to our holy Mary, Mother of God, to intervene on my behalf to find my Mary Purse. That's when I see the pale girl, Perrie, and she says out loud, in front of the bitches, the boys and all: "Lupe, Mrs. Figgart took something that belonged to you. Here, you should have it back."

The others stop crying and they blink and then they all look at me. A girl says "who's Lupe?" I reach out my hand and pale Perrie puts the Mary purse in my palm. I look at that pale girl and in her gray eyes I see something like kindness, but also cold courage.

I look back at her with my Lupe eyes, now full of stars from Our Lady's cloak. I put the Mary Purse in my pocket, and then I go downstairs to work.

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