

(1) My Sister's Marriage

Cynthia Marshall Rich

When my mother died she left just Olive and me to take care of Father. Yesterday when I burned the package of Olive's letters that left only me. I know that you'll side with my sister in all of this because you're only outsiders, and strangers can afford to sympathize with young love, and with whatever sounds daring and romantic, without thinking what it does to all the other people involved. (2) I don't want you to hate my sister – I don't hate her – but I do want you to see that we're happier this way, Father and I, and as for Olive, she made her choice.

But if you weren't strangers, all of you, I wouldn't be able to tell you about this. "Keep yourself to yourself," my father has always said. "If you ever have worries, Sarah Ann, you come to me and don't go sharing your problems around town." And that's what I've always done. (3) So if I knew you I certainly wouldn't ever tell you about Olive throwing the hairbrush, or about finding the letters buried in the back of the drawer.

I don't know what made Olive the way she is. We grew up together like twins – there were people who thought we were – and every morning before we went to school she plaited my hair and I plaited hers before the same mirror, in the same little twist of ribbons and braids behind our heads. We wore the same dresses and there was never a strain on the hem or a rip in our stockings to say to a stranger that we had lost our mother. (4) And although we have never been well-to-do – my father is a doctor and his patients often can't pay – I know that there are people here in Conkling today who think we're rich, just because of little things like candlelight at dinner and my father's cigarette holder and the piano lessons that Olive and I had and the reproduction of *The Anatomy Lesson* that hangs above the mantelpiece instead of botanical prints. "You don't have to be rich to be a gentleman," my father says, "or to live like one."

(5) My father is a gentleman and he raised Olive and myself as ladies. I can hear you laughing, because people like to make fun of words like "gentleman" and "lady", but they are words with ideals and standards behind them, and I hope that I will always hold to those ideals as my father taught me to. If Olive has renounced them, at least we did all we could.

(6) Perhaps the reason that I can't understand Olive is that I have never been in love. I know that if I had ever fallen in love it would not have been, like Olive, at first sight but only after a long acquaintance. My father knew my mother for seven years before he proposed – it is much the safest way. Nowadays people make fun of that too, and the magazines are full of stories about people meeting in the moonlight and marrying the next morning, but if you read those stories you know that they are not the sort of people you would want to be like.

(7) Even today Olive couldn't deny that we had a happy childhood. She used to be very proud of being the lady of the house, of sitting across the candlelight from my father at dinner like a little wife. Sometimes my father would hold his carving knife poised above the roast to stand smiling at her and say: "Olive, every day you remind me more of your mother."

(8) I think that although she liked the smile, she minded the compliment, because she didn't like to hear about Mother. Once when my father spoke of her she said: "Papa, you're missing Mother again. I can't bear it when you miss Mother. Don't I take care of you all right? Don't I make things happy for you?" It wasn't that she hadn't loved Mother but that she wanted my father to be completely happy.

(9) To tell the truth, it was Olive Father loved best. There was a time when I couldn't have said that, it would have hurt me too much. Taking care of our father was like playing a long game of "let's pretend," and when little girls play family nobody wants to be the children. I thought it wasn't fair, just because Olive was three years older, that she should

always be the mother. I wanted to sit opposite my father at dinner and have him smile at me like that.

(10) I was glad when Olive first began walking out with young men in the summer evenings. Then I would make lemonade for my father (“Is it as good as Olive’s?”) and we would sit out on the screened porch together watching the fireflies. I asked him about the patients he had seen that day, trying to think of questions as intelligent as Olive’s. I knew that he was missing her and frowning into the long twilight for the swing of her white skirts. (11) When she came up the steps he said, “I missed my housewife tonight,” just as though I hadn’t made the lemonade right after all. She knew, too, that it wasn’t the same for him in the evenings without her and for a while, instead of going out, she brought the young men to the house. But soon she stopped even that (“I never realized how silly and shallow they were until I saw them with Papa,” she said. (12) “I was ashamed to have him talk to them”). I know that he was glad, and when my turn came I didn’t want to go out because I hated leaving them alone together. It all seems a very long time ago. I used to hate it when Olive “mothered” me. Now I feel a little like Olive’s mother, and she is like my rebellious child.

(13) In spite of everything, I loved Olive. When we were children we used to play together. The other children disliked us because we talked like grownups and didn’t like to get dirty, but we were happy playing by ourselves on the front lawn where my father, if he were home, could watch us from his study window. So it wasn’t surprising that when we grew older we were still best friends. (14) I loved Olive and I see now how she took advantage of that love. Sometimes I think she felt that if she was to betray my father she wanted me to betray him too.

I still believe that it all began, not really with Mr. Dixon, but with the foreign stamps. She didn’t see many of them, those years after high school when she was working in the post office, because not very many people in Conkling have friends abroad, but the ones she saw – and even the postmarks from Chicago or California – made her dream. (15) She told her dreams to Father, and of course he understood and said that perhaps some summer we could take a trip to New England as far as Boston. My father hasn’t lived in Conkling all of his life. He went to Harvard, and that is one reason he is different from the other men here. He is a scholar and not bound to provincial ideas. People here respect him and come to him for advice.

(16) Olive wasn’t satisfied and she began to rebel. Even she admitted that there wasn’t anything for her to rebel against. She told me about it, sitting on the window sill in her long white nightgown, braiding and unbraiding the hair that she had never cut.

“It’s not, don’t you see, that I don’t love Father. And it certainly isn’t that I’m not happy here. But what I mean is, how can I ever know whether or not I’m really happy here unless I go somewhere else? (17) When you graduate from school you’ll feel the same way. You’ll want – you’ll want to know.”

“I like it here,” I said from the darkness of the room, but she didn’t hear me.

“You know what I’m going to do, Sarah Ann? Do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to save some money and go on a little trip – it wouldn’t have to be expensive, I could go by bus – and I’ll just see things, and then maybe I’ll know.”

(18) “Father promised he’d take us to New England.”

“No,” said Olive, “no, you don’t understand. Anyhow, I’ll save the money.”

And still she wasn’t satisfied. She began to read. Olive and I always did well in school, and our names were called out for Special Recognition on Class Day. Miss Singleton wanted Olive to go to drama school after she played the part of Miranda in *The Tempest*, but my father talked to her, and when he told her what an actress’ life is like she realized it wasn’t what she wanted. (19) Aside from books for school, though, we never read very much. We

didn't need to because my father has read everything you've heard of, and people in town have said that talking to him about anything is better than reading three books.

Still, Olive decided to read. She would choose a book from my father's library and go into the kitchen, where the air was still heavy and hot from dinner, and sit on the very edge of the tall, hard three-legged stool. (20) She had an idea that if she sat in a comfortable chair in the parlor she would not be attentive or would skip the difficult passages. So she would sit like that for hours, under the hard light of the unshaded bulb that hangs from the ceiling, until her arms ached from holding the book.

"What do you want to find out about?" my father would ask.

"Nothing," Olive said. "I'm just reading."

(21) My father hates evasion.

"Now, Olive, nobody reads without a purpose. If you're interested in something, maybe I can help you. I might even know something about it myself."

When she came into our bedroom she threw the book on the quilts and said: "Why does he have to pry, Sarah Ann? It's so simple – just wanting to read a book. Why does he have to make a fuss about it as though I were trying to hide something from him?"

(22) That was the first time that I felt a little like Olive's mother.

"But he's only taking an interest," I said. "He just wants us to share things with him. Lots of fathers wouldn't even care. You don't know how lucky we are."

"You don't understand, Sarah Ann. You're too young to understand."

"Of course I understand," I said shortly. "Only I've outgrown feeling like that."

(23) It was true. When I was a little girl I wrote something on a piece of paper, something that didn't matter much, but it mattered to me because it was a private thought. My father came into my room and saw me shove the paper under the blotter, and he wanted me to show it to him. So I quickly said, "No, it's private, I wrote it to myself, I didn't write it to be seen," but he said he wanted to see it. (24) And I said, "No, no, no, it was silly anyway," and he said, "Sarah Ann, nothing you have to say would seem silly to me, you never give me credit for understanding, I can understand a great deal," I said it wasn't just him, really it wasn't, because I hadn't written it for anyone at all to see. Then he was all sad and hurt and said this wasn't a family where we keep things hidden and there I was hiding this from him. (25) I heard his voice, and it went on and on, and he said I had no faith in him and that I shouldn't keep things from him – and I said it wasn't anything big or special, it was just some silly nonsense, but if it was nonsense, he said, why wouldn't I let him read it, since it would make him happy? And I cried and cried, because it was only a very little piece of paper and why did he have to see it anyway, but he was very solemn and said if you held back little things soon you would be holding back bigger things and the gap would grow wider and wider. (26) So I gave him the paper. He read it and said nothing except that I was a good girl and he couldn't see what all the fuss had been about.

Of course now I know that he was only taking an interest and I shouldn't have minded that. But I was a little girl then and minded dreadfully, and that is why I understood how Olive felt, although she was grown-up then and should have known better.

(27) She must have understood that she was being childish, because when my father came in a few minutes later and said, "Olive, you're our little mother. We mustn't quarrel. There should be only love between us," she rose and kissed him. She told him about the book she had been reading, and he said: "Well, as it happens, I do know something about that." They sat for a long time discussing the book, and I think he loved Olive better than ever. (28) The next evening, instead of shutting herself in the bright, hot kitchen, Olive sat with us in the cool of the parlor until bedtime, hemming a slip. And it was just as always.

But I suppose that these things really had made a difference in Olive. For we had always been alike, and I cannot imagine allowing a perfect stranger to ask me personal questions before we had even been introduced. (29) She told me about it afterward, how he had bought a book of three-cent stamps and stayed to chat through the half-open grilled window. Suddenly he said, quite seriously: "Why do you wear your hair like that?"

"Pardon me?" said Olive

"Why do you wear your hair like that? You ought to shake it loose around your shoulders. It must be yards long."

(30) That is when I would have remembered – if I had forgotten – that I was a lady. I would have closed the grill, not rudely just firmly enough to show my displeasure, and gone back to my desk. Olive told me she thought of doing that but she looked at him and knew, she said, that he didn't mean to be impolite, that he really wanted to know.

And instead she said: "I only wear it down at night."

(31) That afternoon he walked her home from the post office.

Olive told me everything long before my father knew anything. It was the beginning of an unwholesome deceit in her. And it was nearly a week later that she told even me. By that time he was meeting her every afternoon and they took long walks together, as far as Merton's Pond, before she came home to set the dinner table.

(32) "Only don't tell Father," she said.

"Why not?"

"I think I'm afraid of him. I don't know why. I'm afraid of what he might say."

"He won't say anything," I said. "Unless there's something wrong. And if there's something wrong, wouldn't you want to know?"

Of course, I should have told father myself right away. But that was how she played upon my love for her.

(33) "I'm telling you," she said, "because I want so much to share it with you. I'm so happy, Sarah Ann, and I feel so free, don't you see? We've always been so close – I've been closer to you than to Father, I think – or at least differently." She had to qualify it, you see, because it wasn't true. But it still made me happy and I promised not to tell, and I was even glad for her because, as I've told you, I've always loved Olive.

(34) I saw them together one day when I was coming home from school. They were walking together in the rain, holding hands like school children, and when Olive saw me from a distance she dropped his hand suddenly and then just as suddenly took it again.

"Hullo!" he said when she introduced us. "She does look like you!"

I want to be fair and honest with you – it is Olive's dishonesty that still shocks me – and so I will say that I liked Mr. Dixon that day. (35) But I thought even then how different he was from my father, and that should have warned me. He was a big man with a square face and sun-bleached hair. I could see a glimpse of his bright, speckled tie under his tan raincoat, and his laugh sounded warm and easy in the rain. I liked him, I suppose, for the very things I should have distrusted in him. (36) I liked his ease and the way that he accepted me immediately, spontaneously and freely, without waiting – waiting for whatever people wait for when they hold themselves back (as I should have done) to find out more about you. I could almost understand what had made Olive, after five minutes, tell him how she wore her hair at night.

(37) I am glad, at least, that I begged Olive to tell my father about him. I couldn't understand why at first she refused. I think now that she was afraid of seeing them together, that she was afraid of seeing the difference. I have told you that my father is a gentleman. Even now you must be able to tell what sort of man Mr. Dixon was. My father knew at once, without even meeting him.

(38) The weeks had passed and Olive told me that Mr. Dixon's business was completed but that his vacation was coming and he planned to spend it in Conkling. She said she would tell my father.

We were sitting on the porch after dinner. The evening had just begun to thicken and some children had wandered down the road, playing a game of pirates at the very edge of our lawn. (39) One of them had a long paper sword and the others were waving tall sticks, and they were screaming. My father had to raise his voice to be heard.

"So this man whom you have been seeing behind my back is a traveling salesman for Miracle-wear soles."

"Surrender in the name of the King!"

"I am more than surprised at you, Olive. That hardly sounds like the kind of man you would want to be associated with."

(40) "Why not?" said Olive. "Why not?"

"It's notorious, my dear. Men like that have no respect for a girl. They'll flatter her with slick words but it doesn't mean anything. Just take my word for it, dear. It may seem hard, but I know the world."

"Fight to the death! Fight to the death!"

"I can't hear you, my dear. Sarah Ann, ask those children to play their games somewhere else."

(41) I went down the steps and across the lawn.

"Doctor Landis is trying to rest after a long day," I explained. They nodded and vanished down the dusky road, brandishing their silent swords.

"I am saying nothing of the extraordinary manner of your meeting, not even of the deceitful way in which he has carried on this – friendship."

(42) It was dark on the porch. I switched on the yellow overhead light, and the three of us blinked for a moment, rediscovering each other as the shadows leaped back.

"The cheapness of it is so apparent it amazes me that even in your innocence of the world –"

My father was fitting a cigarette into its black holder. He turned it slowly to and fro until it was firm before he struck a match and lit it. It is beautiful to watch him do even the most trivial things. (43) He is always in control of himself and never makes a useless gesture or thinks a useless thought. If you met him you might believe at first that he was totally relaxed, but because I have lived with him so long I know that there is at all times a tension controlling his body; you can feel it when you touch his hand. Tension, I think, is the wrong word. It is rather a self-awareness, as though not a muscle contracted without his conscious knowledge.

(44) "You know it very well yourself, Olive. Could anything but shame have kept you from bringing this man to your home?"

His voice is like the way he moves. It is clear and considered and each word exists by itself. However common it may be, when he speaks it, it has become his, it has dignity because he has chosen it.

(45) "Father, all I ask is that you'll have him here – that you will meet him. Surely that's not too much to ask before you – judge him."

Olive sat on the step at my father's feet. Her hands had been moving across her skirt, smoothing the folds over her knees, but when she spoke she clasped them tightly in her lap. She was trying to speak as he spoke, in that calm, certain voice, but it was a poor imitation.

(46) "I'm afraid that it is too much to ask, Olive. I have seen too many of his kind to take any interest in seeing another."

“I think you should see him, Father.” She spoke very softly. “I think I am in love with him.”

“Olive!” I said. I had known it all along, of course, but when she spoke it, in that voice trying so childishly to sound sure, I knew its absurdity. How could she say it after Father had made it so clear? (47) As soon as he had repeated after her, “A salesman for Miracle-wear soles,” even the inflections of his voice showed me that it was ludicrous; I realized what I had known all along, the cheapness of it all for Olive – for Olive with her ideals.

I looked across at my father but he had not stirred. The moths brushed their wings against the light bulb. He flicked a long gray ash.

(48) “Don’t use that word lightly, Olive,” he said. “That is a sacred word. Love is the word for what I felt for your mother – what I hope you feel for me and for you sister. You mustn’t confuse it with innocent infatuation.”

“But I do love him – how can you know? How can you know anything about it? I do love him.” Her voice was shrill and not pleasant.

“Olive,” said my father, “I must ask you not to use that word.”

(49) She sat looking up at his face and from his chair he looked back at her. Then she rose and went into the house. He did not follow her, even with his eyes. We sat for a long time before I went over to him and took his hand. I think he had forgotten me. He started and said nothing, and his hand did not acknowledge mine. I would rather he had slapped me. I left him and went into the house.

(50) In our bedroom Olive was sitting before the dressing table in her nightgown, brushing her hair. You mustn’t think I don’t love her, that I didn’t love her then. As I say, we were like twins, and when I saw her reflection in the tall, gilded mirror I might have been seeing my own eyes filled with tears. I tell you, I wanted to put my arms around her, but you must see that it was for her own sake that I didn’t. (51) She had done wrong, she had deceived my father and she had made me deceive him. It would have been wicked to give her sympathy then.

“It’s hard, of course, Olive,” I said gently. “But you know that Father’s right.”

She didn’t answer. She brushed her hair in long strokes and it rose on the air. She did not turn even when the doorknob rattled and my father stood in the doorway and quietly spoke her name.

“Olive,” he repeated. “Of course I must ask you not to see this – this man again.”

(52) Olive turned suddenly with her dark hair whirling about her head. She hurled the silver hairbrush at my father, and in that single moment when it leaped from her hand I felt an elation I have never known before. Then I heard it clatter to the floor a few feet from where he stood, and I knew that he was unhurt and that it was I, and not Olive, who had for that single moment meant it to strike him. I longed to throw my arms about him and beg his forgiveness.

(53) He went over and picked up the brush and gave it to Olive. Then he left the room.

“How could you, Olive?” I whispered.

She sat with the brush in her hand. Her hair had fallen all about her face and her eyes were dark and bright. The next morning at breakfast she did not speak to my father and he did not speak to her, although he sat looking at her so intensely that if I had been Olive I would have blushed. (54) I thought, He loves her more now, this morning, than when he used to smile and say she was like Mother. I remember thinking, Why couldn’t he love me like that? I would never hurt him.

Just before she left for work he went over to her and brushed her arm lightly with his hand.

“We’ll talk it all over tonight, Olive,” he said. “I know you will understand that this is best.”

(55) She looked down at his hand as though it were a strange animal and shook her head and hurried down the porch steps.

That night she called from a little town outside of Richmond to say that she was married. I stood behind my father in a shadowy little hallway as he spoke to her. I could hear her voice, higher-pitched than usual over the static of the wires, and I heard her say that they would come, that very evening, if he would see them.

(56) I almost thought he hadn’t understood her, his voice was so calm.

“I suppose you want my blessings. I cannot give them to deceit and cowardice. You will have to find them elsewhere if you can, my dear. If you can.”

After he had replaced the receiver he still stood before the mouthpiece, talking into it.

“That she would give up all she has had – that she would stoop to a – for a – physical attraction –”

(57) Then he turned to me. His eyes were dark.

“Why are you crying” he said suddenly. “What are you crying for? She’s made her own choice. Am I crying? Do you think I would want to see her – now? If she – when she comes to see what she has done – but it’s not a question of forgiveness. Even then it wouldn’t be the same. She has made her choice.”

(58) He stood looking at me and I thought at first that what he saw was distasteful to him, but his voice was gentle when he spoke.

“Would you have done this to me, Sarah Anne? Would you have done it?”

“No,” I said, and I was almost joyful, knowing it was true. “Oh, no.”

(59) That was a year ago. We never speak of Olive any more. At first letters used to come from her, long letters from New York and then from Chicago. Always she asked me about Father and whether he would read a letter if she wrote one. I wrote her long letters back and said that I would talk to him. But he wasn’t well – even now he has to stay in bed for days at a time – and I knew that he didn’t want to hear her name.

(60) One morning he came into my room when I was writing to her. He saw me thrust the package of letters into a cubbyhole and I knew I had betrayed him again.

“Don’t ally yourself with deception, Sarah Ann,” he said quietly. “You did that once and you see what came of it.”

“But if she writes to me –” I said. “What do you want me to do?”

(61) He stood in the doorway in his long bathrobe. He had been in bed and his hair was slightly awry from the pillows, and his face was a little pale. I have taken good care of him and he still looks young – not more than forty – but his cheekbones worry me. They are sharp and white.

“I want you to give me her letters,” he said. “To burn.”

(62) “Won’t you read them, Father? I know that what she did was wrong, but she sounds happy –”

I don’t know what made me say that except that, you see, I did love Olive.

He stared at me and came into the room.

“And you believe her? Do you think that happiness can come from deception?”

(63) “But she’s my sister,” I said, and although I knew that he was right I began to cry. “And she’s your daughter. And you love her so.”

He came and stood beside my chair. This time he didn’t ask me why I was crying.

He kneeled suddenly beside me And spoke very softly and quickly.

“We’ll keep each other company, Sarah Ann, just the two of us. (64) We can be happy that way, can’t we? We’ll always have each other, don’t you know?” he put his hand on my hair.

I knew then that was the way it should be. I leaned my head on his shoulder, and when I had finished crying I smiled at him and gave him Olive’s letters.

“You take them,” I said. “I can’t – ”

He nodded and took them and then took my hand.

(65) I know that when he took them he meant to burn them. I found them by chance yesterday in the back of his desk drawer, under a pile of old medical reports. They lay there like love letters from someone who had died or moved away. They were tied in a slim green hair ribbon – it was one of mine, but I suppose he found it and thought it was Olive’s.

(66) I didn’t wonder what to do. It wasn’t fair, don’t you see? He hadn’t any right to keep those letters after he told me I was the only daughter he had left. He would always be secretly reading them and fingering them, and it wouldn’t do him any good. I took them to the incinerator in the back yard and burned them carefully, one by one. His bed is by the window and I know that he was watching me, but of course he couldn’t say anything.

(67) Maybe you feel sorry for Father, may you think I was cruel. But I did it for his sake and I don’t care what you think because you’re all of you strangers, anyway, and you can’t understand that there couldn’t be two of us. As I said before, I don’t hate Olive. But sometimes I think this is the way it was meant to be. First Mother died and left just the two of us to take care of Father. And yesterday when I burned Olive’s letters I thought, Now there is only me.

Source: James Moffett & Kenneth R. McElheny, ed. *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*. New York: Mentor, 1966. p. 185-197.