

TRUDY VERSUS MARNIE

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OF THE SIX widows in Sentinel Butte, Trudy was the youngest. Mildred, as her name suggested, was the eldest, and the other four were of little interest. In a town of only eighty-three people, it is still true that there are some ladies not worth knowing. Trudy knew *of* everyone in town, because her job at the post office permitted her to see every piece of mail that was posted or delivered. When she placed envelopes in post office boxes, she noticed people's names and addresses and who sent what, and to whom. She knew who was behind on her bills. And whose children didn't send birthday cards. The post office was open for business on Mondays and Thursdays because mail only came on those days. The other days, Trudy was supposed to unlock the office at eight and lock it back up again at four-thirty, so people could come empty their post office boxes or drop letters in the mailbox. There need not be an employee present, since the mail did not come in or go out.

Trudy did not approve of people who came to the post office on off days; she suspected with affronted disapprobation that they were avoiding her. One or two days a week, she would not unlock the door to the lobby at eight, and the office would remain closed all day. She alternated the days on which she committed this slight offence of inconvenience, so no one would know in advance on which day he would go to collect his mail, and be locked out. Trudy considered her arbitrary closures within the discretion allotted to her as postal employee and an excellent incentive to collect mail when the office was actually open and staffed. She also called herself the Postmistress, but the only other townspeople who used this title was the sweet and elderly Charlotte, who worked at the phone company. Haphazard hours were irritating but a fact of life in Sentinel Butte, like the

lack of a grocery store and the resulting forty-minute drive for anything that Pete didn't sell at the gas station.

When Marnie first moved to town, she came to the Post Office to collect her mail on a Wednesday, found the office locked, and assumed it was a mistake, or that Trudy was ill. When it happened three more times, she called the main office in North Falls to complain. Trudy received a telephone call from her regional supervisor and, after making some excuses about car trouble and misplaced keys, had been forced to open the post office lobby every single day, on time, after that, for five straight weeks. Since Marnie had made her request for mandamus, she only infrequently failed to unlock the office on time, and received no more calls from North Falls.

After the complaints, Trudy routinely kept back Marnie's mail a day or two, sometimes more. She didn't do it with bills, since in her opinion that could possibly be traced to her (she wasn't sure how). But anything personal, anything that could conceivably have been misdirected due to handwriting on the envelope, would sit in an empty box for a day or two before Trudy got around to putting it into the mail slot marked "Hankshaw, TJ and Maureen."

Then there was the storm. It was a freakish early storm the last week of September. Forty-eight inches of snow had fallen in less than twenty-four hours. Ranchers around Sentinel Butte lost a quarter of their cattle herds. Some lost more. Marnie and her husband, TJ, had rounded up a number of their herd into the barn, but then barn had collapsed, the roof caved in under the weight of the snow, and over a hundred of their cattle had been lost.

Marnie and TJ appeared at the Double T Bar and Grill a few days after the storm and the only talk was of what had been lost and what had been spared. Trudy did not frequent bars, but it was the only place in town for a bite to eat, so she suffered through the

pool table and smoke in exchange for a meal she didn't have to cook for herself. Marnie was in high spirits over the fact that her pet miniature Hereford, Bilbo, had been spared. Trudy privately wondered if TJ hadn't permitted his wife to bring the animal into the machine shed that doubled as their garage during the storm, since she spoiled it rotten. She also judged it outrageous that Marnie worried more about her pet than the lost cows that should have been sold to pay their bills that winter.

But this only confirmed Trudy's original suspicions about Marnie, who TJ should never have married in the first place. The girl wasn't even from Wyoming (she was from Illinois). Even a Kansas girl would have been a better choice. There weren't any ranchers in Illinois and folks there were soft, because Chicago was in Illinois and everyone knew city people were helpless in the west. Illinoisans probably treated all their livestock like pets and didn't understand winter and expected every single town to have its very own movie theater.

Shortly after the storm, when people were still finding cattle drowned in puddles of snow melt and burning them in great piles, Trudy stopped for gas at Pete's. Pete owned the gas station, served as the mayor, plowed the streets in the winter, and collected trash. He was not a friend. But his was the only gas in town and unless she wanted to drive over to North Falls, forty miles on the highway, she would buy gas from Pete. At least he didn't cheat people and charged a reasonable rate, unlike some other gas station owners with effective monopolies.

She filled up her Buick with gas and went inside where, as usual, Pete was not present. Finding the envelope with her name, Trudy Pickerl, she wrote \$38.00 in the space for "amount owed" and replaced it. One thing about Pete, he never forgot to send the bill at the end of the month. Not for gas at Pete's, not for the garbage collection. He was diligent, she could give him that.

Trudy drove home, though it was only about six blocks. Her house was yellow clapboard that she continually repainted instead of replacing with siding. It was one and a half stories with a formal parlor at the front and a staircase that led up to a spare bedroom that was never used. Instead, Trudy used the first floor bedroom off the dining room. The kitchen was a small, crowded space between the dining room and the large family room at the back. The family room was paneled in dark wood but with four large windows to the east and south. The snow that had fallen during the freak September blizzard nearly reached the bottom of the windows. It had taken her a solid hour to clear a path with the shovel to the garage where the snow blower was stored. Trudy had a three-car garage because when her husband was alive, he had liked to tinker and woodwork and rebuild old cars. A model A Ford, completely restored, still sat in the garage in the unlikely event there was ever a parade in Sentinel Butte, and old cars were needed to drive in it.

Trudy was making a dinner of hamburger and rice casserole and thawed a pound of ground beef in the microwave. When her husband had been alive, Trudy had never made box dinners since Baxter would never have eaten them. But now that he was gone and she could do precisely as she pleased, every single day, she still ate pretty much what she had when he was alive. Her one concession was to have macaroni and cheese from a box, with pure, spiteful delight, on the occasional bitterly cold night. It was not as if Baxter had been demanding of her talents as a cook, he just preferred everything to be home made, like his own mother had made it. Cheese from a tin foil packet did not meet this criterion. So, even if that meant she had to get up at five with him, to make breakfast, it was homemade. Nowadays, Trudy never rose before seven.

A phone call interrupted her dinner preparation and she answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi Trudy, it’s Pete.”

“Oh, hello. How are you?”

“I’m just fine. I’m just calling because—you remember that fence you built on the east side of the house?”

“I’m looking at it right now.”

“Well, it’s too close to the road.”

“I can build a fence as close as I want to the road.”

“Well, that’s just not quite technically true because of the easement.”

“There’s no easement on the deed.”

“Well, it should be—“

“It’s not.”

“Why don’t we go ahead and take a peek at the deed—“

“You don’t need to be peeking at any deeds. My fence is fine.”

“Trudy,” Pete said, starting to use his mayor voice, “Now, I know you don’t agree with it, but the law’s the law. You don’t have to agree with it. You don’t own the property because there’s an easement, and you can’t build the fence on land you don’t own. We’ve had some complaints from citizens that there’s not enough room to drive with two-way traffic. And after this snow storm, half the street’s blocked because the fence is keeping my snow plow from moving the snow off the road.”

“An easement doesn’t mean you don’t own the land. I looked it up. And if I didn’t have that fence, all that snow would be in my yard and I’d have to take care of it. Me, an elderly widow.”

“There’s no need to move snow off a lawn.”

“The fence is mine. It’s there.”

“Trudy, I just hoped we could resolve—“

“Well, we can’t.”

She clicked the phone back on the wall and shook her head, her hands trembling with frustration. She didn’t understand why Pete was being so difficult. If she hadn’t needed the fence in the first place, she never would have spent the two thousand dollars it had cost to put it in. What did he think she was doing? Making work for the North Falls carpenter she had hired to build it? She was not the New Deal Government.

On Thursday at the post office, Trudy saw a letter addressed to TJ and Maureen Hankshaw and noticed that it came from the United States Post Office in North Falls, Wyoming. She held the envelope up to the light but still could read none of the text. There was no good reason for Marnie getting letters from the Post Office, unless she had taken to complaining about irregular hours again, which wasn’t possible since Trudy had been almost completely extremely punctual regarding office hours since she had received the phone call from North Falls.

Frowning, she placed the envelope in the Hankshaw’s mail slot after briefly considering an attempt to steam the letter open. But she knew she could never get the envelope sealed again without Marnie noticing, and worried that between Marnie and Pete, she might not make it to sixty-five.

That weekend, TJ’s friend Brock rolled his pickup again when he was driving home from the bar in Bevington at one-thirty in the morning. Brock was close to the Hankshaw ranch and called TJ, who took the front-end loader off the work tractor and pulled the truck out of the ditch with a winch. TJ figured that the crash sobered Brock up enough that he

could drive himself home, and they could all go to bed. He sent Brock on his way, and told him for a guy who grew up in the country, he sure had a hell of time driving on gravel.

Trudy heard about this from her best and one true friend in town, Betty, who lived up the road from Brock. She came by the Post Office on Mondays to discuss the gossip with Trudy and the two sipped coffee while they sat, legs crossed, behind the tiny counter.

“How is Brock’s truck?”

“Oh, it’s fine. He has that big brush guard and I don’t know that it was really *rolled*—just in sad shape in the ditch. I didn’t ask for details.”

“I’m glad no one was hurt, but I don’t suppose this will teach Brock a lesson.”

“He’s rolled that truck at least twice since he bought it and it can’t be more than five years old.”

“But with friends like TJ, why change?”

“Did you know Marnie’s been writing to the Post Office in North Falls again?”

“No!”

“She is.” Trudy pursed her lips and nodded her head.

“What about?”

“I don’t know, yet. But the lobby’s been unlocked every day like clockwork so there shouldn’t be a single thing to write about.”

“Have you heard anything from North Falls?”

“Not since that first phone call.”

“I wonder what it could be.”

“I don’t know but I don’t like it.”

The mailman from North Falls came in, then, and Trudy stood to receive that day's bundle. She noticed another envelope, addressed to Pete, also from the North Falls Post Office. She went to the Hankshaw's mail slot and compared the two.

"Look—" she said to Betty, "These look the same to me."

"Why would they both receive letters, unless Pete's complaining, too?"

Trudy's thin eyebrows drew close and she held the envelopes high above her head with both hands in front of the fluorescent lights. They appeared the same thickness and had the same printing and return address, but it was impossible to tell if they were identical on the inside. Sitting back down, Trudy told Betty about Pete's call, telling her to take down her fence. Betty noted that Pete was the only person inconvenienced by her fence but there was nothing he could do about it. Which is probably why he was calling to complain, she told Trudy, just to let off steam.

When Betty left the Post Office, she waited at home all day for Brock to get back from work. He was a wrangler at the Hankshaw's, called the Flying E Ranch, just about a twenty-five minute drive away. She knew she could offer him some dinner and some Busch Light, and he'd chat with her. He was young, between girlfriends, and a terrible cook. So she went outside and flagged down his truck as he came up the road, headlights shining in the glimmering evening light.

The phone rang again at Trudy's and it was Betty calling.

"Well I didn't learn anything about what Marnie and TJ might be getting from the Post Office in Great Falls."

Trudy was unsurprised.

“I did learn that TJ and Marnie are looking to buy the eighty acres north of their ranch house from the Nudds.”

“I wonder how they can afford it after the loss of those cattle.”

“What the banks think people can afford and what they really can isn’t the same thing.”

“It’s none of my business anyway.” She and Betty hung up.

That night, Trudy found the phone book for North Falls and made a list of lawyers that she thought looked reputable. She was going to need one for her lawsuit against the town of Sentinel Butte over the fence, and she might need one to sue the Post Office if Marnie and Pete succeeded in getting her fired. The next day she drove to North Falls after making phone calls to set up appointments with three law offices.

The first office was right on Main Street in one of those brick buildings that was built in the sixties, but the developer couldn’t afford to—or didn’t care to—comply with the new town aesthetic. Instead of the log cabin look of the rest of the newer buildings in town, the office was a grim red brick slip in between the Cowboy Café and the sporting goods store that sold expensive brands like Patagonia to the tourists who came through the intersection of the Old West and the “New West” that was North Falls.

When Trudy came in, the receptionist offered her a bottle of water and she waited for the lawyer to walk back from a hearing at the courthouse up the block. The law offices of Tucker & Tucker turned out to be Roger Tucker, of counsel, and his daughter, Ruby. Trudy wasn’t sure how she felt about lady lawyers, but Ruby, once she sat down, was easy and kind.

“I think I’m going to need a lawyer because I built a fence and Pete, our mayor, told me I have to tear it down,” she explained when Ruby asked what brought her in to see the attorney. Trudy decided not to tell her about the issue with the Post Office until she was sure she was about to be fired. Ruby recommended waiting for a certified letter before she did anything, at which point point, she, Ruby, could respond appropriately. It was possible the issue could be resolved with just a few letters, and Trudy should forward any correspondence directly to her office.

The retainer, said the lawyer, would be only one thousand dollars, and she would return any unused portion to Trudy at the conclusion of the action, unless, of course, there was a lawsuit. If there were a suit filed, she and Trudy would speak again regarding the course of action and a new fee structure. The whole thing was so much easier and less frightening than Trudy had anticipated that she cancelled the other appointments and wrote a check to Tucker & Tucker, LLP, then and there.

That Thursday at the post office in Sentinel Butte, she saw yet another letter. This time it was for Harold and Pauline Nudd, and it was the exact same as the previous letters for Marnie and TJ Hankshaw, and for Pete. Trudy’s heart skipped a beat. Once again, Trudy held the envelope up to the light and once again, she could see nothing but the shape of text in the form of a greeting and nothing additional. She had never considered the Nudds to be unfriendly, and so the letter was a surprise. Harold was a retired rancher and kept to himself, as most ranchers did, and Pauline had been married to him since they were both seventeen years old and graduated from the now defunct Sentinel Butte High School. Except for the fact that Harold had no use of his left arm, the result of the time he had been caught between a bull, and a fence and the barbed wire had torn enough nerve that the arm hung

straight, Pauline and her husband might have been one person. Both tall and slim and weathered; they were quiet people.

Trudy agonized over what she could have done to them, and wondered if the answer was nothing, except that Marnie and TJ had poisoned them against her. Or maybe she *had* done something. Maybe Harold, with his bum arm, had come for the mail one Tuesday, and found it closed. Maybe he was angry after the difficulty of fumbling with the key in the cold, and driving the truck all the way into town on a freezing morning, and his coffee had gotten cold in truck on the way. Marnie must have said something to them. How far she and TJ's influence would go in Sentinel Butte was an open question, now that the Nudds had apparently taken her side. Trudy called Betty to tell her about the latest letter, and Betty replied that she had heard that the Nudds needed to sell a few acres because one of their sons was in trouble and needed the money for a lawyer. If they were in a tough spot, Marnie could have told her husband to make the offer to buy the land, only if the Nudds agreed to join her letter writing campaign to North Falls.

Inspecting all of the Nudd's available mail, Trudy found only a couple of bills and a card from a daughter-in-law, in addition to the letter from the Post Office in North Falls. She stared at the envelope, wishing she could open it, for longer than she could rightly say.

Trudy decided that she needed groceries and was feeling smothered by Sentinel Butte, so she climbed into her Buick and made the trip to the North Falls IGA. She might even buy some gin and make a gin and tonic. Generally, Trudy did not approve of spirits, but she had heard of ladies in golf clubs in Denver drinking gin and tonics, and while she did not approve of these ladies, when one was a persecuted widow, one was entitled to the occasional cocktail. She walked the aisles of the grocery store in a daze. Trudy was loading her groceries into the car in the parking lot, when Marnie's Dodge 3500 dually pulled in a

few spaces down. Marnie jumped down and spotted Trudy, but instead of Marnie's usual frosty greeting, she looked surprised and awkward.

Marnie smiled at her slowly and uncertainly, looking like she wanted to say something, but Trudy turned away in shock. Of course Marnie was acting differently. She was trying to get Trudy fired and, when confronted with her in flesh, Marnie didn't know how to behave. Trudy drove home with the thin skin of her knuckles transparently white on the steering wheel.

In front of her house, along her new fence, were three bright red plastic triangle flags, like the kind the gas company uses to warn a resident that they've just buried a line. Inhaling a deep breath, Trudy muttered a furious insult and walked out to inspect the flags. If Pete thought he could mark the fence and have it taken down before going through her lawyer, he was mistaken, she thought wrathfully, and yanked up the flags, tossing them in the trashcan next to the garage.

For the first time since Baxter had died, Trudy went to the closet to take down his old Winchester M12 and she searched the shelves for a case of shells. The 12-gauge had been Baxter's father's and Baxter, not inheriting any paternal duck hunting skills, had kept the gun around for what she assumed were primarily sentimental reasons. She wasn't sure exactly what she was doing when she pulled the gun down, nor why she carefully inspected the shells for dryness before placing both in the trunk at the bottom of her bed. She hadn't fired a gun in years but, as her own dad had told her, nothing drew a person's attention like hearing the *ka-chunk* of a shell being loaded into a shotgun. With luck, she wouldn't even need to shoot. Not that she expected to even have to load it, either. She was just mad, and it seemed like a safe precaution, in case some men came by to tear out her fence.

That there was no court order and no letter so far meant little to Trudy. Folks around Sentinel Butte had never much trusted the government to do anything effective except tax them. Pete would probably even want to save the expense of a court battle with her. She began to regret running to the lawyer instead of sitting home all day to see who had put those flags in the snow in the first place. A streak of independence ran through her that she'd inherited from her grandfather, who'd had his ranch house burned during the Johnson County War. Never trust the law, he'd said, or hold out for help from Uncle Sam, or the state. While you waited, you'd just as likely watch your home burnt down by the very powers who were supposed to be protecting you. Thinking of the 12 gauge and the shells in the trunk at the bottom of her bed, she went to sleep.

On the mornings when she only went to the Post Office to unlock it at eight, Trudy woke at seven to shower and make coffee. She dressed, combed her hair, dyed fair blonde to disguise the gray, and used a pencil on her eyebrows. Nothing, she thought, made her look older than not filling in the scraps of gray eyebrows above her pale eyes. The days that she actually worked, she wore a little bit more makeup, and made sure to wear the matching blouse to her pants. The other days, especially when it was cold—and it was almost always cold enough to wear a jacket—she could hide her mismatched clothes behind outerwear and go back home to warm slippers and a housecoat.

After she returned from opening the office, she looked around her living room and saw the television, the big one she had bought after Baxter died. She had thought that when she was alone she could watch anything she wanted without her husband's interference, but she rarely watched it now, even after springing for the satellite dish and all those extra channels. Sports were a mystery to her, and all the movies nowadays seemed to be about

unhappy people in cities who didn't even bother to brush their hair or wear makeup. If a movie star didn't look like Maureen O'Hara, Trudy didn't understand why she was on the screen.

Baxter hadn't much cared for movies. He had inherited a hardware store in town and ran it until he finally retired. The money it brought in had slowed to a trickle by then, but they had saved enough for a comfortable if not extravagant retirement. She had only taken the job at the post office because she found she missed having something to do and someone to watch out for. With no Baxter to care for, she'd needed to be needed by someone else. Which was why when people came to the office on her off days she was so put out. Trudy could admit this to herself. She was there for them, and they ought to recognize and appreciate it. That was what Marnie didn't understand when she complained about the post office being locked on her off days. Patrons were supposed to come in on the *on* days. That was the whole point of having an employee.

The sound of a truck on the gravel brought her to the window and she looked out to see Brock's truck coming up the road. It was looking little worse for wear after the latest accident, and had only some fresh scrapes on the brush guard and a gash of white above the running board. Driving about fifteen miles an hour on the road outside her house, he spotted her in the window and, waving, pulled into her drive. That was how young people should behave: driving slowly and waving to their elders.

Trudy walked outside and saw him pull a fifty-pound bag of ice melt from the bed of the pickup. The light was low in the drive, and she waved at the motion sensor until the 300-watt bulb on the side of the work shed burst on.

"I was just at TJ and Marnie's and there's a big front coming in. They said I'd better take one of these for your walk." Trudy couldn't quite see his eyes under the shade of his

hat. Brock continued, "I'm just going to put some melt down here, on the steps, and on out down the walk to the shed. You can put more down later if you want, but this bag's too heavy for you to move when it's full."

"Thank you," Trudy replied, watching him tear the top off the plastic bag and begin spreading the blue crumbles along her walk and up the steps. "I hadn't heard about the storm. I—I was out, today." She wasn't sure why she lied.

"I thought as much," Brock said, "Tomorrow I'll check in before I head to the ranch, make sure you can get out."

"There anything to do at that ranch this time of year?"

"Not much. But we find things because I don't want to go all the way down to Arizona. Dalton knows he needs me in the summers and so he's been good about making the winters work. Between him and TJ, I get plenty to do."

"I'm glad," said Trudy. Then, "Would you like to stay for supper? I've never mastered cooking for one and I've got too much steak."

Brock smiled easily and replied, "There's no such thing as too much steak." He added, "It's not from the IGA, is it?"

Trudy found herself returning his wry grin.

"It is! I live in town and don't get out to the ranch houses to get my beef. I'm stuck with the IGA."

"Well I'll bring you something better on the way home tomorrow. Not that I would ever turn down dinner," Brock added, suddenly aware he might have insulted her. "I should have grabbed something from the deep freeze at TJ and Marnie's when they asked me to stop here. Matter of fact, they might have told me to, but I just forgot after getting the ice melt from the shed."

Trudy was sure he was confused about the Hankshaws. She walked up the steps.

“Let me get supper started while you finish up. Just come on in when you’re done.”

Brock wiped his boots on the rug when he came in, and Trudy served them both dinner in the living room on two TV trays, so he didn’t feel pressured by the formality of her dining room. He left after complimenting her cooking and reminding her he’d check in on her in the morning to make sure the walk was clear enough for her to get to the car. Pete should have plowed the drive for her car by then, but if not, Brock said he would take care of it. Work at the ranch would be slow tomorrow, he added, and it wouldn’t matter if he made it in an hour or two late.

The next morning, Trudy unlocked the door to the post office only seventeen minutes after eight, which, considering they’d had another eleven inches of snow, wasn’t bad at all. She spent the morning tidying up and humming to herself in an unusually good mood.

When the letters came in at eleven on the delivery truck from North Falls, she accepted the packet with a smile and took to sorting the rubber-banded bundles. Then she saw a letter from the North Falls Post Office, identical to the ones that had come for TJ and Marnie, and Pete, and the Nudds the previous week. It was addressed to Brock Lynch, PO Box 190, Sentinel Butte, WY.

Tears sprang, uncontrolled, in her eyes and she squeezed them shut and then blinked furiously. She took a breath and her hand shook slightly. Brock. It wasn’t possible.

She dropped the letter and saw the top of the next bundle. It was addressed to her friend Betty and her husband, from the North Falls Post Office. The next one was for Charlotte at the phone company, from the North Falls Post Office. There was a letter for everyone in town. And then there was one addressed to her.

Dear Resident:

The United States Post Office, Office of the Postmaster General, hereby informs you that your local Post Office, 80001, will be closed as of December 31. We regret any inconvenience. Congress has authorized the closures of 3,193 post offices as the result of budget constraints and consolidation. Your local post office meets the closure criteria. Your new post office will be located at:

103 Main Street

North Falls, Wyoming

Post Office hours may be found by calling the United States Post Office at 1-800—

“Did you only just get that notice?” said Marnie Hankshaw, dinging the bell at the door. “We got ours last week. What a nightmare!”