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# SHARYN McCRUMB

## IF EVER I RETURN, PRETTY PEGGY-O

Long-gone friends and the casualties of war  
haunt a folksinger hiding from her past....

"Striking...Brilliant."

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

JOHN CALVERT  
ARROWOOD

October 25 1946 • May 26 1966



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IF EVER

IF EVER  
I MEET  
A PRETTY  
PEGGY-0

**Sharyn McCrumb**

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# 1

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Days of loathing and nights of fear  
To the hour of the charge through the streaming swamp,  
Following the flag,  
Till I fell with a scream, shot through the guts.  
Now there's a flag over me in Spoon River!  
A flag! A flag!

EDGAR LEE MASTERS

**S**PENCER ARROWOOD DROVE the patrol car into the cemetery and took a sharp right turn into the past. It was seven o'clock in the morning, too early for any other visitors to come, even on Memorial Day. Spencer wanted to be out of there before anyone spotted his sheriff's car and rushed over to offer him sympathy. It had been a long time, and he scarcely felt anything anymore except a sense of obligation to come here, but he wanted to be gone before the little American flags began appearing on the flat bronze markers.

He parked on the asphalt loop near Cal's grave, picked up the paper bag from the passenger seat, and threaded his way through the wet grass and the plastic flowers toward the family plot. The Arrowood graves had once been surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, but it had given way to a curbing of stone. Easier for the mowers. The last vestige of Victorian pomp was the marble angel over his Confederate great-grandfather. Albert Arrowood had been a teenaged corporal, whose only war wound was frost-

bite, but he had made money in later life, and his widow had been a fanciful woman with a taste for the baroque.

The empty-eyed angel presided over inscribed blocks of granite that diminished in size by generation, ending in the stark simplicity of the most recent memorials: flat bronze markers that didn't try to upstage the azaleas and the dogwoods. Most of the cemetery's recent graves were flat markers, but people hadn't come to terms yet with this modern austerity; they insisted on adding a pot of plastic flowers for decoration. In a cemetery bright with pink-flowered crown vetch and sweetbay magnolia, Spencer wondered why they bothered. Because of winter, he supposed, and perhaps out of the guilt of neglect. Graves that went unvisited from one year to the next could avoid the look of desolation, thanks to perpetual upkeep and plastic flowers: imitation remembrance.

No flowers for Cal.

He held the paper bag between circled thumb and forefinger, reading the grave markers as he walked past them. He smiled as he passed the grave of Odell Watson, who had shoveled shit in Louisiana during World War II and died of a heart attack in '74: little American flag number one.

No flowers for Cal. His mother would bring them later and chide him for not having visited the cemetery. "And on Memorial Day, too!" she would say. If he didn't manage to head her off, that remark would degenerate into a whole conversation about how wonderful Cal had been, and how he was up there with Jesus waiting for the family to join him, and how Spencer didn't love him. "Even tore up the last letter your brother ever wrote without letting the rest of us read it:" *The ones who really loved him*, she meant. Spencer had heard it all before, at least twice a year since 1966; he avoided his mother on her Cal-days. Martha knew by now not to put her calls through.

Just past the boxwood hedge was Bobby Beaupre. Spencer remembered him as "one of the big boys," older than Cal, even, whose attitude toward the younger kids alternated between bullying and condescension. Spencer never passed his grave without remembering their first encounter in the cemetery.

It was Halloween, and Spencer was six years old. He had pleaded to be allowed to go trick-or-treating with Cal, but Cal

didn't want any babies tagging along after him and his gang. Spencer had been sent off in his pirate costume with two little girls, and they were warned to stay together and to look out for bad boys who might take away their bags of candy. Spencer had been on his way home with half a sackful of Tootsie Rolls, jelly beans, and Double-Bubble. He said he was cutting through Oakdale because it was a shortcut, but it was really to prove his bravery to the sniffing fairy princess and the plastic-masked witch, who refused to enter the dark cemetery. The shortcut also served to get rid of them.

He had been just about to this point by the boxwood hedge when he saw a white-sheeted figure coming at him. In the moonlight, Spencer could see white socks and high-topped sneakers beneath the sheet. He tucked his candy under his arm and sprinted for the low stone wall, heedless of the shouts behind him. Later at home, Spencer squirmed in embarrassment as Cal made everyone laugh with a whole routine about how Spencer thought he saw a ghost and hightailed it out of the graveyard, when it was just Bobby Beaupre in a bedsheet. Spencer tried to explain that he knew it was a live person in disguise; he had thought it was a candy thief, but no one paid any attention to him. Cal's version made a cuter story.

Bobby Beaupre was soon to be flag number two when the civic committee came around to decorate the graves of the glorious war dead. Bobby had made it back from Korea with sergeant's stripes and a few shrapnel scars, and then wrapped his Plymouth around a tree on 611 after a Saturday night at the tavern.

A clump of pink azaleas triggered a later memory: the itch of an old Army blanket and a breath of White Shoulders cologne.

Oakdale Cemetery was really two places in Spencer's mind, both occupying the same space geographically: like Persia and Iran, different connotations for the same piece of ground. The Oakdale Cemetery of Spencer's childhood was a place reserved for "dead people" in the ghost story sense of the term. Nobody they really knew was there, except perhaps an aged and scarcely familiar grandparent. That cemetery had been a place to give an extra charge to hide-and-seek; it served as a fitting backdrop



for a night spent telling horror stories with the guys. ("Give me back my gol-den arm!") In his teens he'd snuck a few beers in Oakdale, or used it for make-out sessions with Janice Waller or Sue Karyl Simmons. It had been a stage set in those days, with the horrors no more authentic than the Jaycees' Fright House on Halloween.

Lately, though, and he saw it as a sign of aging, the cemetery had turned into a subdivision of Hamelin, with more and more of his acquaintances moving out there. First went old people he knew at church, then his grade-school teachers, and lately it had been his parents' friends. A familiar name appeared in each new obituary column. He could remember when he hadn't bothered to read it at all. Sprinkled through the lists of each current generation-to-die had been friends his own age, of leukemia or drowning, and Vietnam had claimed another handful. Soon, he supposed, people his age would be dying of cancer or heart disease, and then the terrors of Oakdale would be past anything the Jaycees could conjure up. Just now, he was still a stranger, a semi-interested party, visiting people with whom he had little in common.

The Arrowood plot was well tended and devoid of plastic flowers. His mother brought real ones often enough. Spencer stood with his back to the granite angel and stared down at his brother's grave. The letters on the marker were Brasso bright, like an Army belt buckle: JOHN CALVERT ARROWOOD OCTOBER 25, 1946—MAY 26, 1966 PRO PATRIA. He had often wondered what Cal would make of that inscription, after getting straight D's in high school Latin. He set the paper bag down beside the grave and knelt to brush off the bronze lettering bits of dried grass from the last mowing; the marker felt cold to his touch. The sunny field was bright but unnaturally silent. Not even a birdsong to cover the sound of his own breathing, which seemed unnecessarily loud, as if he were flaunting life before those who no longer possessed it.

He glanced back at the patrol car, parked alone on the gravel circle. He still had the place to himself; the old ladies who were the regulars wouldn't come until the mist lifted and the sun burned away the dew.

"Hello, Cal," he said to the staring metal slab. "I wish to

God you'd grow up." Spencer Arrowood, at thirty-eight, had a streak of gray at the temples and a tendency to squint at fine print; but Cal, lying down there in Marine dress blues, stayed nineteen years old. He wouldn't age in Spencer's mind, and he wouldn't take on that spectral dignity assumed by the dead, those solemn white-robed figures who replaced people one had actually known. Cal was no granite angel. He existed in a series of mental filmclips: in his Scout uniform, in shoulder pads and smudged eyes, in a crew cut and wrinkled fatigues. When Spencer visited the grave, for ten minutes' awkwardness on the dates specified, the memory of Cal might assume any of these guises, but always he would be sneering at his sissy kid brother: "Ya-aah, candy-ass! You brought me flowers!"

The fact that he outranked Cal by twenty years did nothing for Spencer's sense of inferiority. He was still the younger brother, the one who had to prove himself. He had spent a childhood taking dares and getting stitches to earn his right to tag along. And then suddenly on the night of the senior prom, as he was dressing in that room full of trophies, there was a scream from downstairs. And then sobbing. He went down and heard the solemn uniformed messengers say again that Cal was dead. Ever a slave to middle-class civility, his mother had offered them coffee, but the soldiers declined politely and left, so that she could have hysterics without offending the sensibilities of strangers. Spencer stood around awkwardly for a while, feeling like an eavesdropper to his parents' grief, and then he went back upstairs to a room that had just become a shrine, without even calling Jenny to say he wasn't coming.

Suddenly Cal had become a saint. At the funeral his parents seemed to be burying somebody else: someone who was kind and wise and solemn. But Spencer couldn't ever find that somebody in his mind. When he came to the cemetery, he always met the sneering Cal, unhallowed by death and spoiling for a fight. "Ya-aah, candy-ass! You brought me flowers!"

Cal was a jeering witness to the incident at his own funeral. Spencer wished he could visit the grave just once without thinking of it. He was standing with his parents under the green canopy provided by the funeral home, shaded from the bright June day around them. The sky was cloudless blue, and the

new-mown grass mixed its sweet smell with the scents of funeral flowers and his mother's perfume.

Spencer remembered the square cardboard fans with the wooden tongue-depressor handles that the funeral home provided. He had stared at the picture of a red-robed Jesus surrounded by sheep. "Onward Christian Soldiers." He had counted the sheep to block out the sounds of grief around him.

Reverend Noll had just finished reading the service, and the mourners had begun to wander away. Cal's gunmetal gray coffin squatted in a blaze of wreaths, waiting for the family to leave so that it could sink into the earth. Spencer had stood there in his hated double-breasted blue suit, wondering whether the shame was in crying or not having to. His mother wept silently; his father had his look of smug stoicism, like a man who has withstood the dentist's worst tortures and remained unbroken.

"Do you want a flower to remember him by?" he had asked Spencer.

Not wanting to seem irreverent, Spencer nodded. He reached out to the nearest wreath and pulled off a red carnation.

Then the old bastard had turned to his wife. "Do you want one, Jane?" She'd said no. "Neither do I," he announced. "I don't believe in these sentimental gestures at funerals."

Spencer hung his head, knowing that he had failed an unannounced test, and that only he would remember it. Only he and, of course, the dear merciless departed. "Ya-aah, candy-ass! You brought me *flowers!*"

He lifted the paper bag and unscrewed the metal bottle cap. "Not this time, buddy," said Spencer, pouring the quart of beer on his brother's grave. Pabst Blue Ribbon—in high school Cal had called it PBR, and he'd chugged it in tasteless gulps as a rite of manhood. "Not this time."

His respects paid to the dead, Spencer carried the empty beer bottle back to the patrol car. He did not look back.

The quickest way to downtown from the cemetery was to take Ashe Lane, a street that Spencer had not thought of as "Cal's paper route" for years. Now, with the memories freshly stirred, he remembered each yard by dog or shrubbery. (Here was the German shepherd who used to collect his own paper and the

two from next door, and lay them in a soggy heap on the welcome mat.) Spencer sometimes went with Cal to deliver papers, in bad weather when he took the car. Cal would drive along slowly while Spencer pitched the rolled-up paper at each porch, pretending to be lobbing passes at a wide receiver. The Dandridge place, a big white house with a circular driveway, had been a tough one. Too many trees in the yard. It had changed hands just recently, he recalled. Martha had been full of speculation on the new owner, a folksinger named Peggy Muryan. From what he could gather, most of the women in town were dying to meet her, but so far she had kept to herself.

He slowed down to look at the Cape Cod on the corner of Ashe and Belmont. It was surrounded by scaffolding: the wood was being replaced with aluminum siding, he decided. What color had it been in the paper route days? Green? Brown? The houses had changed some since those days; in fact, Spencer could no longer remember exactly how they had looked back then, because he passed them so often. The changes in the town were gradual things scarcely noticed, like the lines on his own face. He had lived there all his life; you could plot his entire biography on a survey map of Hamelin, except for college and the service. Most of it was right there, though, from the white frame house he had been born in to the sheriff's office that occupied most of his waking hours.

A few flags hung limply at intervals along Main Street; the rest would be out before noon. As he approached the park benches in front of the courthouse square, he slowed the patrol car to a crawl, looking for Vernon Woolwine, whoever he was today. Spencer hoped it wasn't the Nazi storm trooper. Not on Memorial Day.

He had heard that every Southern town had one resident oddball, a picturesque nonconformist who, in the local parlance, was a few bricks short of the load. The uncontested eccentric of Hamelin was Vernon Woolwine. Physically he was somewhere in middle age, although in some of his incarnations it was hard to tell, and he had a boot-faced plainness that argued against a flair for drama, but there it was: Vernon Woolwine was a welfare-funded exercise in street theater.

On all but the coldest, wettest days, Vernon Woolwine was

an attraction in downtown Hamelin. Nobody seemed to know where he had come from. When Spencer came home after being stationed in Germany, Vernon was already installed as a fixture in Wake County, a curiosity that was both exotic and familiar, like the covered bridge, or Carver Jessup's tree-climbing coon-dog. Spencer had always meant to find out more about Vernon Woolwine, but he never got around to it. After all, Vernon was harmless, and the sheriff wasn't even sure that flamboyant vagrancy constituted a crime.

Vernon Woolwine just wasn't himself. Ever.

Every day at mid-morning, he would appear in the vicinity of the courthouse in an elaborate costume, and he would spend the rest of the day strolling up and down the streets of Hamelin, or lounging on the park bench, acknowledging the stares from strangers with a courtly nod. Sometimes he would be Elvis: a white jumpsuit and a shaggy blue-black wig, or he would impersonate Rooster Cogburn/John Wayne with cowboy duds and a black eyepatch. There was no set schedule to his impersonations, and nobody seemed to know where he got the costumes. Knoxville, most likely. He probably saved up handouts and small sums from his government checks so that he could purchase new identities from time to time. He didn't attract much attention anymore. People just kind of noticed who Vernon was today, and let it go at that. Once some high school boys had tried to beat him up, but some of the old-timers from the VFW had run them off. Spencer wondered why adolescents felt so threatened by anything out of the ordinary.

A flash of red at the door of Denton's Café caught the sheriff's attention, and he slowed down for a closer look. There was Superman, complete with red cape and black boots, emerging from the café, balancing a fried pie on the top of his coffee cup. Spencer gave him a wave that was half salute, and the pudgy Superman bowed in return.

At the courthouse intersection, Spencer turned left; the sheriff's office was around back. He noticed that the wreath hadn't appeared on the statue of the Confederate soldier yet. Sooner or later there would be trouble over that, he reckoned; but not this year. The liberals didn't outnumber the old guard yet; he kept track by reading the editorial page of the *Knoxville Journal*.

Hamelin, Tennessee, was still bound by traditions, even when their meanings had been obscured by time. People who took integration pretty much for granted still stood up when they played "Dixie" at the high school football games.

This loyalty to the familiar might go a long way toward explaining why Spencer Arrowood got elected sheriff. He was a hometown boy, kid brother of Hamelin's football star and war hero Cal Arrowood. Sometimes Spencer wondered if he had got the job as a posthumous tribute to the golden boy, but most of the time he didn't let it worry him. He was a good sheriff, competent enough, and he knew a lot of people, which made it easy to get the job done without a lot of unnecessary theatrics. It helped him to know which kids were more scared of their parents than of jail cells, and which drunks to go looking for at nine-thirty, before they got tanked enough to cause trouble.

Spencer didn't think he was the equal of his predecessor, Nelse Miller, but given the way the world had changed since those days, maybe nobody could be. Sheriff Miller, a silver-haired gentleman given to wearing a white Stetson, had known everybody in Wake County, and most folks had considered him a friend of the family, but the county was smaller then. Nowadays strangers lived in the old frame houses, kept to themselves, and commuted forty miles to work. They didn't go to church, and they didn't frequent the night spots. As a peace officer he would encounter them only during license checks, or when somebody burgled their cozy little homes, which was seldom. Spencer didn't think anyone could know *everybody* in Hamelin anymore.

There wasn't much call to use a gun around Hamelin, but Spencer could if he had to; he'd spent a lot of his childhood roaming the woods with one weapon or another. When he had decided to go into law enforcement, he thought that was a pretty good background to have, but four years' experience had convinced him otherwise. Now he thought that a few courses in typing and public speaking might have served him better.

Today's big job was a speech at the high school on drunk driving, and he dreaded it. High school students hated to be told the consequences of drunk driving; they resented the implication that they were mortal. Today the students would be even

less receptive to the message, because they were in school making up a snow day while the rest of the world took the holiday off. Getting the message across wouldn't be easy. That speech needed a big, scary-looking hulk to freeze the message into the kids—exactly the right job for Deputy Godwin, and probably the only thing he was good at, but Godwin was on night duty for the week. The other deputy, Joe LeDonne, was a wiry five feet eight, too small to impress the beer-guzzling jocks and too quiet to accept the assignment. That assembly full of foot-stomping show-offs wouldn't see into LeDonne's silence to know that he'd be the one who could pull them out of a wreck piece by piece without losing his cool or his supper. Of course, LeDonne was a Vietnam vet. Spencer wondered if Cal would have been like that if he had come home: a thin crust of snow over a pit of ice water.

The outer door to the office was open, and Spencer could hear the sound of Martha's typewriter over the drone of the fan. She was always early; she liked to finish her first cup of coffee before eight. Besides, Martha was between husbands, so there wasn't much to stay home for. As he eased his way around the screen door, trying not to let in any more flies, he could see her head bent over the typewriter, a mare's nest of Orphan Annie curls that made him long to duck her head in a bucket of water. She might land husband number three in spite of it, though; the scrawny look she'd had in high school had stood her in good stead, now that most women her age were running to fat. In a small town, a gaunt, tanned woman of thirty-eight passed as a desirable date, if not as a beauty.

Martha Ayers heard him come in and switched off her typewriter. "Where were you last night?" she asked in a stern voice.

She didn't mean it the way it sounded. They'd got that straight between them years ago.

"Good morning, Martha," he said, sighing. "Where was I supposed to be?"

"Spencer, I don't know where your mind is these days! At the high school."

He flipped the page of his desk calendar. "I have it down for today. One o'clock."

"That's your speech to the kids. I'm talking about the meet-

ing of the planning committee." He still looked blank. "For the high school reunion," she finished patiently. "This is the twentieth year, you know."

Spencer sighed. "Is there more of that coffee?"

She nodded toward the pot on the filing cabinet. "Now I got elected reunion chairman, so I have to contact everybody, because I have access to a typewriter and all. The reunion starts on August eighth—that's a Friday, and there'll be events all weekend."

"I might look in on it," said Spencer politely.

"You'll do more than that!" Martha shot back. "There aren't many members of the class of '66 still in town, so everybody's going to have to pitch in."

Spencer eyed her warily. "Pitch in?"

"Don't worry, Spence. Nobody's going to ask you to hang streamers in the gym. But you *are* the sheriff of Wake County, and that makes you a pretty important person in our class. I'd like you to do some of the asking about arrangements."

"Like what?"

"For starters, you could see about getting the high school gym for a dance on August ninth. When you're out there making your speech today, ask the principal about it. I need to get places reserved before I can get the announcements printed up."

"Why don't you give him a call?" asked Spencer. He didn't want to be associated with a high school reunion. He wasn't even sure he wanted to attend.

Martha ignored him. "... and we decided we want you to present our alumni gift to the school at the banquet."

"Why me? Chuck Winters is a lawyer in Knoxville. He's used to making speeches."

"No, everybody said it ought to be you. We're giving the school a plaque inscribed with the names of all the boys from school that got killed in Vietnam. Since Cal was the first one, and him so popular and all, we thought it was only right for you to give the speech."

"I don't know," he muttered, over the ringing of the telephone.

"And don't forget today is Memorial Day. Every drunk in



Tennessee will be on his way to the beach!" She snatched up the phone before he could reply.

As Spencer walked back to his office, Martha cupped her hand over the receiver, calling out again, "Memorial Day, Spencer!"

"I won't forget," he promised.

"Memorial Day," grunted Joe LeDonne. "When the country honors its war dead by pulling a three-day drunk. You bet."

He had come in about ten past eight, acknowledged Martha's existence with a nod, and strode past her into Spencer's office. He sat perched on the arm of a chair, still wearing his aviator shades, his rolled-up sleeves offsetting his tie. "Do you want me on a speed trap?" he asked.

Spencer shook his head. "The highway patrol ought to have that covered. I just wanted you to be aware of possible problems. You'll be on patrol today—I have to make a speech."

"The drunk-driving routine?"

"Yeah. Any ideas on what I should say?"

Martha appeared in the doorway carrying the mail. "Why don't you read them 'Please, God, I'm Only Seventeen' out of Ann Landers? I always cry over that one."

Spencer and LeDonne looked at each other. "I don't think I could do it justice," he said cautiously. "I guess I'll just stick to statistics and quote the penalties."

"Well, I hope they stay awake for it," she sniffed. "Oh, by the way, Spencer, there is something else you could do for me about the reunion. I have to write to the out-of-towners, and I'll need Jenny's address."

"I don't have it," he said quietly.

"Don't you really? I know where both my ex's are." Having taken this small revenge on behalf of Ann Landers, Martha swept out.

"Reunion?" asked LeDonne, when the door closed behind her.

"High school. Twentieth."

LeDonne considered it. "I guess mine is about two years off. I hope to God they can't find me."

"You wouldn't go?"