

Southern **PSYCHO** *Tales*



Bruce
STRAUCH

IS IT
DEAD?



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DEAD UNION

Virginia has always had its fair share of Civil War buffs, but Sarah Prine was a special case. She had been fixated on the "Lost Cause" since back in grade school, and history and historical romance novels were her only reading. At Sweet Briar College she majored in Southern History, and only dated boys from Washington & Lee because Robert E. Lee had been President there.

Instead of joining a sorority, Sarah spent her time on Confederate genealogy projects. She was real disappointed when she found none of her ancestors had done anything noteworthy, and she never could quite accept this lack of distinction.

Sarah was a pretty little blonde of the type who was wise to snag a husband young because the bloom was soon off the peach. In her case, the husband was a hard-charging law student at Washington & Lee who turned into a hard-charging lawyer.

One thing about hard-charging lawyers is they are real practical minded and money-oriented and have little time for daydreams. Jeffcoat Morgan, the lawyer in question, went to work for a prestige firm in a little town over on the eastern shore and started making money right off. This allowed him to afford the mortgage on a hundred-fifty year-old house which Sarah knew she had to have the first time she laid eyes on it. It had heart-of-pine floors and bullet scars from where McClellan's cavalry went by in 1862.

In a small Virginia town, no prominent man's wife works, and if she's well enough off to stay home she can't be expected to do all that heavy housework. So she has to have a maid and a cook. These social advantages left Sarah plenty of time for book clubs and garden clubs and especially to daydream. And with Sarah, this meant the glamorous, hazy dreams of the antebellum South.

By the time she was three years married, Sarah had built a personal Civil War book collection to rival some of the libraries in Richmond. She collected furniture from the 1840s and '50s and bought period wall paper and curtain patterns and rugs and quilts. She even talked Jeffcoat into building a separate kitchen out back, unattached the way it would have been in the original house. This she filled with a wood stove and cast iron cooking stuff all of which the real cook refused to use, but Sarah would occasionally fiddle around with, smoking up the place and burning a batch of salty cornbread.

There were no children because Sarah gave Jeffcoat an extremely difficult time about sex. Catch a high-strung attorney at a pivotal moment and it's not hard to make him so sexually insecure that he'll lose whatever limited interest he ever had in the subject. In Sarah's case, she wanted him to "role play" and be a Confederate cavalier. This included actually dressing up in costumes and strapping on a sword. Predictably, Jeffcoat couldn't take this humiliation and soon became impotent.

There was a Doctor Bowen Tyler in town who was a Civil War buff and collected guns and swords and particularly Confederate medical stuff. He had medical books and a doctor's chest and all kinds of operating implements from that period. This was all set up in a room with a canvas tent rigged beneath the ceiling. Evenings, Bowen would sit in there in a camp chair and sip sour-mash bourbon and read his books like he was a graycoat army doctor on a battlefield.

Although Bowen was only forty, he was twice divorced, and there weren't many eligible women in the little town. Sarah made a point of getting to know him and being much less complicated about sex with him. The nurse Ilene Kimbel told around town that Sarah would show up wearing no underpants and they'd just do it right there on the examination table with a waiting room full of patients outside. After all, Bowen had had a passel of ancestors in the Civil War, and Sarah liked that a whole lot.

Jeffcoat was always working late or out of town on a big law case, so Sarah started frequenting Bowen's lavish M.D. home for sex and Civil War communion. In his collection she found a Confederate doctor's diary recording the exact location of where field hospitals had been located during campaigns. Virginia had more skirmishes and campgrounds and unheard-of-battles

than one can count. Sarah knew many of these sites would have unmarked graves not protected by the National Park Service.

She started out by convincing Bowen to invest in a metal detector and take a jaunt here and there trying to locate something of interest. This also gave them the opportunity to have sex in sylvan locales whose proximity to old battles just made Sarah's juices flow.

Sarah, who ordinarily couldn't pick up a spoon she had dropped, just pitched right in with shovel and pickaxe and didn't seem to mind getting dirty at all. When she hit paydirt, she'd slow down and trowel and sift as thoroughly as any archaeologist. As a result they turned up a lot of belt buckles and broken swords and minié balls.

Sarah seemed to have some unerring instinct for finding the exact grave sites, and when Bowen first remarked on this, she looked off at crows sitting in a distant pine tree top and said: "I feel like I've been here before. Like I've seen this place before."

Sarah began a museum of things she had dug out of graves and converted a sewing room into a little archaeology lab with a sink and a battery of chemicals. Jeffcoat just rolled his eyes and went on being a hard-charging lawyer. He measured himself by how much money he made and had long ago given up any desire to impress Sarah.

"Hey, when you've had a woman a thousand times, you get bored," he sometimes told the guys down at the courthouse although he never made any effort to find himself a girlfriend.

Meanwhile, however, Sarah's romance with Doctor Bowen Tyler had started to go stale. Perhaps he agreed with Jeffcoat about interest waning, or perhaps he had tired of digging up graves. At any rate he allowed his nurse Ilene to convince him that he was better occupied making a pile of money and being interested in her. As a result he began to break grave-robbing dates.

Sarah was very peeved by Bowen's growing lack of cooperation and by his locking up the medical diary. One day she confronted him with his transgressions. Ilene tried to block Sarah from his office but failed. Later, she was able to report the conversation.

"I need that diary," Ilene had Sarah saying. "It holds a secret to my past."

"You had no ancestors in the Civil War," said Bowen with a bit of a sneer. Like a lot of old Virginia family types, he was snobbish about his own particular genealogy.

"I know I did," Sarah insisted with a crazed fire in her eyes. "I made the mistake of looking for men instead of women. And you know what else?"

"Uh ... what?" said Bowen. He was as bothered as Ilene by how unhinged Sarah looked.

"I lived in that time. I was a Confederate spy, and I was executed by a Yankee firing squad just before the Battle of the Wilderness. That diary is going to help me find where I'm buried."

"That diary cost me five thousand dollars," Bowen argued.

Sarah flipped back into her normal self. "You ever heard of alienation of affection?" she asked in her most sugary drawl. "Jeffcoat could take you for a lot more than that piddling little sum."

Shaken, Bowen surrendered the diary. Sarah continued her explorations and soon afterwards hired one Sam Butler Brummer, a big, beer-gut redneck, to come along and do the heavy digging. Brummer was a right bad actor who had done time for burglary and truck hijacking. He was suspected of having killed a couple of men over the West Virginia line near Bluefield although nothing was ever proved.

Being a lawyer, Jeffcoat knew the man's reputation and asked Sarah about this. She said she was getting close to something so big that she "expected trouble." Brummer was there for if things got rough.

Jeffcoat had noted that Sarah was acting a bit on the paranoid side. She was very suspicious of wrong-number calls on the phone and claimed someone was stealing her mail out of the post box. She would lock herself in her library for hours on end, making Jeffcoat identify himself in elaborate fashion before she'd allow him in. At night she kept a restored Civil War Colt revolver loaded under her pillow. It was not a toy, but as perfectly capable of killing as it had been in 1864. Jeffcoat hadn't slept with Sarah in two years so he was able to ignore this, but just barely.

Even though Jeffcoat lived in his own bubble, the whole town knew Sarah had been fooling with Bowen Tyler. It wasn't much of a leap for them to assume she was a nymphomaniac and

was now doing the dirty deed with the low-life Sam Brummer. In truth, Sarah was some other kind of maniac. Or maybe she wasn't crazy at all, just in touch with something ordinary folks couldn't understand.

What happened later was certainly strange.

Soon after that confrontation, Bowen closed up his medical practice without warning and left town. Ilene was devastated by that and by her new Fiero being repossessed since Bowen was no longer making the payments. She told everyone who would listen that Sam Brummer had threatened the doctor and scared him into hiding.

The police listened patiently, but Ilene had no evidence and admitted it was mostly supposition. She had seen Brummer talking to Bowen Tyler in the parking lot one evening after work. That was all. And the next day Bowen was packed and gone.

Then Sarah and Brummer were arrested one night for grave-robbing in a Lutheran Church cemetery over near Post Oak and made both print and TV news. When a very angry and humiliated Jeffcoat got the pair out on bond, Sarah acted so crazy he tried to talk her into a voluntary commitment to a mental hospital. Sarah said she had had a union army lover and been killed beside him in 1864. He had given her vital information on the movements of Grant's army around Spotsylvania Court House and been caught. They had died in each other's arms before a Yankee firing squad.

Sarah refused psychiatric help, and Jeffcoat had a big appellate case before the Fourth Circuit the next day and had to be gone out of town.

"I know where my body is buried," Sarah told him as he went out the door at five AM to drive up to Richmond. He was thinking about his appeals brief and dismissed this as more of her craziness. He planned to get her involuntarily committed upon his return.

But Jeffcoat never saw Sarah again. Not even her body.

Soon after that, Sam Brummer was arrested driving Sarah's car. Her clothes were in the trunk. He was put on trial and convicted on powerful circumstantial evidence for the murder of Sarah Prine Morgan. In a separate sentencing, he was condemned to death by electric chair.

His story had sounded completely unbelievable. Brummer

swore he had let Sarah out near Todd's Tavern, one site of the Battle of the Wilderness which covers an enormous expanse of Spotsylvania County. Night was falling. Sarah had been going to meet a man she wouldn't identify. She was wearing an antebellum dress and cloak that Jeffcoat admitted was missing from her closet. She had changed into these in the car. She was very nervous. Or more like excited.

When Brummer let her out of the car, a man was standing on the margin of the woods. He was wearing a big coat with a cape around the shoulders and a broad-brimmed hat. He was carrying a short rifle with a profile like an antique cavalry carbine. If he knew anything, Brummer knew his weapons.

Among the damning evidence, three checks in five hundred dollar sums had been written to Brummer by Sarah. Jeffcoat's theory was that a sociopathic Brummer had taken advantage of an unbalanced Sarah, took her for what he could get, then killed her and buried the body.

After multiple appeals, Brummer was executed by the Commonwealth of Virginia in November of 1981 so there wouldn't be any trouble with liberals and Christmas. He had spent a record short time on death row.

Four years later, in 1985, Marvin Whitehead was setting a foundation back of his house near Mine Run where his son-in-law was going to put a trailer. He struck a grave site. Now Marvin drove a truck with a Confederate flag decal that said "Heritage not Hate -- Fly It." Naturally he realized this find came from the Battle of the Wilderness.

Historical anthropologists from Virginia Commonwealth University were called in. They found a US belt buckle, ten minié balls in a tight pattern and bone fragments of two skeletons, arms laced around each other. The female with the more narrow pelvis and delicate bone structure had a Lady Hamilton watch on her wrist. The watch had been manufactured in 1972. The bones dated to the time of the Civil War.

Marvin had grown up on that piece of ground and swore it had never been tampered with in his lifetime which was to say since 1941. What particularly amazed him was "them professors are supposed to be so damn smart."

Jeffcoat Morgan, widower, got remarried to a county book mobile librarian. While his bride had many academic interests, none of them touched on the Civil War.

HAIRDRYER BONDAGE

Many a strange story emerges from beauty parlors, but the strangest ever to come out of South Georgia is how Misty Earlin got in bondage to a hairdryer.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in mid-November and the usual crowd was in Delores Simmons' beauty parlor which is attached to the side of her house out on Whitechapel Road. Misty Earlin had had a shampoo and set and was under the dryer afterwards.

Misty lived in the Pringletown section of Pineview in a two-bedroom aluminum-sided house. She had moved there three years before after divorcing her husband Willard because he messed around with a succession of truck-stop waitresses at Buddy's out on the interstate.

Misty had gotten in the family way back at the age of sweet sixteen. At the time she was head cheerleader for the Chicopee Fightin' Rebels and life seemed just about perfect. But her pregnancy led to a premature marriage to Willard Earlin the quarterback and a job as secretary for the fuel oil company.

Willard had answered one of those magazine ads that said you could be trained as a game warden and actually got a warden's job but mostly because his daddy went to AA's with a state senator. He wasn't what you'd call a stand-out at his job but was popular locally because he let all the attorneys hunt on state property. He usually joined them to kind of supervise and keep things under control. Willard especially liked warden work because it allowed him to get out in the woods and shoot stuff.

The Earlins' marriage was a rocky one that finally busted up due to Willard's persistent womanizing and his outbursts of brute violence when he drank which was frequently. Now Misty was 31 with a daughter Alison 15 who was beautiful and a model youth, being both captain of junior ROTC and head majorette. While Misty herself was still widely recognized as a

right fine piece, there were few available men around Pineview and those few were scared of Willard, so she remained single.

With that background behind us, we're back at the beauty parlor on the aforementioned Wednesday afternoon. Doris McNeill was complaining that her sorry son-in-law fed the two-year-old on the floor like a dog and the refrigerator was a toxic waste dump. Martha Deweese vowed the game shows on the new TV season were the dullerest thing she had ever sat through and made her embarrassed to be an American consumer. Lucinda Holmes said if they gave medals for slut-hood, Brittainy Shales would be highly decorated.

Misty sat there under the hairdryer thinking what a cheatin' asshole her ex-husband Willard was and wondering if his lawyer and her lawyer had something cooked up between them, it was taking so long for her to collect back child support. You can't trust lawyers anywhere, but in a small town it was murder. They all ate breakfast and lunch together at the Star Café, and on Wednesday afternoons in deer season most of them stopped work and went off together hunting along with Willard who let them on state land. Which was where they were now so nothing was being done on her case, and her daughter Alison needed serious orthodontic work.

"Well I can tell you I've been uncomfortable with that situation for a long time," Lucinda Holmes was saying. She was making pointed reference to Brittainy Shales messing around with the county manager, who was married with grandchildren.

Without warning, Misty heard a voice inside the hairdryer hood.

"Alison is in trouble. She's being strip-searched down at the school."

Without questioning the situation and with curlers still in her hair, Misty jumped up, ran out of the beauty parlor, got in her car and drove down to the high school. There she found that the principal, Raymond Walthall, in company with Janelle Holcombe the guidance counselor, had indeed strip-searched Alison looking for twenty-five dollars that had been stolen from the principal's office. They said they knew it was Alison who took it because she worked in the office during free period and it couldn't have been anyone else. Besides, the money was found stuck in Alison's bra strap, so the case was as good as closed.

Raymond Walthall was young -- maybe 31-32 or around in there -- and real good looking. He was from Atlanta and had graduate degrees which was why he was selected principal over Al Massey the popular football coach and driver's ed instructor. Misty had certainly given Ray some sexual thought since leaving Willard, but she was afraid Willard might shoot him or something if she was even seen talking to him. Now Misty was encountering an authoritarian side of Raymond Walthall she had never imagined.

Misty was torn between being flabbergasted that her model daughter would steal money and being furious over a grown man in a position of high responsibility stripping her daughter down to the brassiere. She decided to deal with the last issue first.

"You got no right," she asserted.

"My authority is flexible to meet the needs of the situation," said Ray, acting awful smug about the whole thing.

"It's no different than being at a doctor," put in Janelle, the guidance counselor. "I mean, I was present. The girl only had to open her blouse and there the money was in plain view."

"You call that guidance?" demanded a furious Misty. "I'm gonna get me a lawyer and sue your ass!"

Janelle's eyes got kind of big at that, but Ray wasn't impressed by the threat. He suspended Alison for three days and recommended that since she came from a broken home she receive counseling.

Back in the car, Alison did admit taking the money, but she swore up one side and down the other that Raymond Walthall owed it to her. This didn't make the least bit of sense, but Alison wouldn't say anything more. You know how stubborn teenagers can be.

Next morning, Misty phoned in sick to the fuel oil company and went straight to Leonard Mackey her divorce attorney. Leonard got all excited and promptly filed a civil lawsuit against both the county school system and Ray Walthall, jointly and severally, asking for one million dollars. By prompt, I mean the next afternoon. Normally it took Leonard months to do anything which was why Willard was allowed to be so far behind in child-support.

The *Pineview Sentinel* reported the matter thoroughly, but Misty wouldn't permit a personal interview with Alison. She

said she would be the spokesperson for her daughter and Ray Walthall ought to be run out of town and Al Massey made interim principal.

The county attorney answered that the search was valid, constitutional and necessary in an atmosphere of mounting juvenile crime. Mackey said the county was scared as shit and knew Alison had the winning case. Misty had no idea that lawyers always asked for way more money than something was worth and began to feel rich.

This was around Thanksgiving when vandals dumped two bags of horse manure into the outside book drop at the county library. The county manager seemed to feel the library was the bigger problem.

"All of those books had to be destroyed," he told Misty on the street outside the Star Café, "and that cost the taxpayers of this county a whole lot of money. Why can't you find something better to do with your time than cost us more money with your plumb-crazy litigation?"

"My daughter is entitled to privacy and dignity of her person," Misty said, using some of the language of the lawsuit pleadings.

"Do you realize the library custodial workers had to wear masks and plastic gloves to accomplish their tasks?" said the manager in a parting shot.

"You'd be advised to wear a mask and gloves around Brittainy Shales," said Misty, getting off one of her better ones.

Most folks in town agreed with Misty that strip-searching of girl teenagers was more serious than the horse manure incident. At the beauty parlor, Martha Deweese said Ray Walthall ought to be in the state pen where they knew how to deal with his kind. Lucinda Holmes was more graphic, urging in the strongest possible language that his gonads ought to be cut off.

In a quiet moment under the hairdryer, Misty got to thinking about the voice and wondering if it was just a mother's intuition. She did recall having strange impulses there before. It was like she knew the second her hair was dry. Like a voice was telling her it was time to get out from under it.

Then she heard the voice again.

"Hang tough," it said.

For some reason this gave her a deep sense of confidence and well-being.

Misty wasn't the only one thinking she was about to be rich from the lawsuit. Her mother, two uncles and a first cousin all called wanting loans for various credit problems that five or six hundred dollars could tide them over. Misty said she hadn't won the lawsuit yet, and they all insisted that you could go to the lawyer and get an advance on your case. All lawyers lent money like that, and she shouldn't listen to his bull about how it was unethical.

Willard called and said since she was so rich now she wouldn't expect any more child support and anyhow he didn't have the money so she might as well drop the domestic action against him. Misty said he didn't give a hoot about his own daughter's humiliation or her orthodontics, and he said the school incident was all her fault for being a permissive parent and letting Alison steal.

Misty kept feeling a strong urge to go back and sit under the hairdryer, but more pressing matters arose. One night after the school suspension was up, Alison was refusing to eat her dinner and Misty was demanding to know if Alison was bulimic or something when the girl suddenly poured out her heart.

"Mom, I've kind of liked this guy for going on a year. We've made out and he's put his tongue in my mouth and stuff but nothing much more than that. I'm just really in love with him and can't eat and can't sleep because of him. I can't sleep even at night. I know he cares for me and I care for him and I really, really want to spend the rest of my life with him and completely devote myself to him."

Misty saw herself at that high school age and felt sick to her stomach. She wanted bigger things for Alison than being a secretary at the fuel oil company. "Has he said he loves you?"

"He wants to but he's afraid of what people will think. He's real into appearances. He's older than I am."

Misty said it was always a mistake for sophomore girls to go around with senior boys because the boys were getting ready to join the navy and it always led to problems such as premarital sex. "I want you to be happy, healthy and successful," said Misty, "but this is not the way to go about it."

She explained to Alison that with the big lawsuit hanging in the balance it was wise policy for Alison to be grounded. They'd