

Baked Beans and the Pulitzer Prize

“She’s dead.” Liz turned from the computer and kicked her husband’s recliner chair to get his attention.

Martin peered at her over the top of the sports page of the paper, his glasses sliding gently down his nose. “Who?”

“Mary Oliver.”

“Oh.....do you want to go to her funeral, love?”

“What?”

“Funeral. Do you want to go to it? You really should see about your hearing you know.”

“Old fool, Mary Oliver is, or rather was, an American poet. I got a book of her poetry out of the Library only last week. It was particularly good. Even I understood it. I thought she was still alive but apparently she’s dead.”

“Oh, lot of that about at our age. What’s she got to say for herself then?”

“Please stop saying ‘oh’ all the time. It’s annoying. Find another letter of the alphabet.”

“R.”

“Am I what?”

“What?”

“You started to ask me something. You said, ‘*Are you...*’.”

“No, you asked for another letter of the alphabet, so I gave you an ‘r’ not ‘a-r-e’ and you imagined the ‘you’.”

“Oh.”

“Now you’re doing it.”

“‘*Pay Attention!*’”

“I am paying attention, what do you think I’m doing in this chair, eating a crocodile?”

“No, *she* said that.”

“What?”

“‘*Pay Attention!*’”

Martin smiled and said good naturedly, “I am, you thunderously stupid old woman. You have my full and completely undivided attention.”

“No, it’s poetry. ‘*Pay Attention. Be Astonished*’.”

“I’ve been paying attention for the past 50 years of our marriage and some of the things you say still astonish me.”

“In a nice way?”

“Not always, no.”

“Oh. She was good anyway. As a poet. She seemed such a reasonable person. Down to earth, she didn’t write airy fairy stuff. I do like poetry but I admit I don’t always understand everything I read. I wish I did but sometimes I feel like, even though something looks like a poem, I can’t quite get the point of what the poet is saying at all. It can be very

frustrating. But Mary Oliver's poems are easy to understand. She really takes me into the moment with her writing, so I feel I'm there with her when she writes about something she saw or felt. I do like what she says about Nature and stuff."

"Stuff? What stuff? Spaghetti, calculus, the Theory of Relativity, how they count how many beans fit in each can of baked beans?"

"It's always food with you, isn't it? And it's by weight."

"Wait for what?"

"Never mind. She won the Pulitzer Prize."

"Sounds like a chook raffle, Pulitzer Prize."

"It's...."

"Yes, yes, I know what it is. Just my little joke."

"Have you looked up the definition of joke lately?"

"Can't read the small print in the dictionary any longer, too small. Another of life's happy little milestones."

"I know what you mean. I had to use a magnifying glass to read the directions on a packet of cake mix the other day."

"My Mum used to say using packet mixes instead of baking from scratch meant you were a terrible cook."

"Your mother *was* a terrible cook."

"That's true. I broke a tooth on one of her scones once. Or was it a biscuit?"

“Anyway, I was talking about Mary Oliver. The *New York Times* described her as ‘*far and away this country’s best-selling poet*’. I looked her up.”

“You’re on that Wickedlypedia thingy again, aren’t you?”

“Wikipedia, you farty old fool.”

“I object to that. I admit to being old but I categorically deny I farted.”

“Not now but give it time, you will. Every day the sun rises, every day it sets and your intestines mark the hours in between.”

“That’s rather poetic if unnecessarily unkind, old woman. So, what did this dead lady write about.”

“Apparently, she liked to walk a lot, out in the bush. Not that I suppose they call it bush over in America. Woods. She liked to walk in the woods, go down to the sea, watch the birds and the skies and the seasons turn, that sort of thing. She had a lovely way with words. She was a lesbian.”

“Oh. Or rather “r.” Does that make you better with words then?”

“Being a lesbian? Don’t know. Wouldn’t think so. It’s a brain thing, not a sex thing.”

“Being a lesbian?”

“Writing poetry.”

“You should try it.”

“Being a lesbian? Think I’m a bit old for changing my ways. Though after fifty years of marriage I can see some definite advantages in being married to a woman instead of a man. At least I wouldn’t have to put the toilet seat down every time I want to have a

pee. Nearly froze my bum off when I forgot to put the seat down and sat down bang on the porcelain at three o'clock this morning. It was like ice. It's a wonder the neighbours didn't hear me scream."

"Probably did but just thought we were having fun in bed."

"You must be joking! The only fun we've had in bed lately is watching reruns of *Midsomer Murders* and eating Maltesers."

"Sadly, that's probably true. But you know I have to put that toilet seat up every time I go for a pee, so we're pretty even on that score. No, I was talking about you trying your hand at writing poetry. You should give it a go; you spend enough time looking at pelicans."

"Pelicans? What have pelicans got to do with it?"

"Birds, walking, the sea. You're always peering into bushes, feeding birds and saving spiders from the sink. You have a gentle way of walking on the earth."

"Who's the poet now, old man? Oh, look at the time. It's got quite dark out. Suppose I'd better get our tea ready. What do you fancy?"

"Apart from waltzing round the living room with you, darling girl? How about some nice baked beans on toast? Then how about we drive down to the bay and go for a stroll out along the pier? Or at least as far as our legs will take us. Full moon tonight. Very romantic, moon on the water, holding hands with a handsome man. Never know, you might get lucky."

“Handsome is it? You most ancient of fools, I didn’t marry you for your looks you know, I just couldn’t resist your eternal optimism. Baked beans on toast it is then. As long as I don’t have to count the beans!”
