

The Tribe of Women

by Daniel Harris

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*A man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned,
for he'll be going out on a day he shouldn't.*

J.M. Synge: *The Arran Islands*

One can't predict the final cadence of one's life. It certainly was not the case with Jack Mahler, a respected and well know abstract painter. He had a good life with plenty of success and fine women. Women liked him and he enjoyed their companionship, but few could tolerate his intensity. Eleanor, Jack's current wife of ten years, put up with his mistress, but then Eleanor was first in line for his estate. Jack lived with his mistress, Portia LaBelle and had given Portia a trust worth over a million dollars and ownership of a dozen paintings. When Jack was up for a good fight, he would visit Eleanor, his wife. Afterward they often would engage in savage lovemaking. Eleanor would apologize for being a shrew, and Jack would soon return to Portia's bed.

Jack had assumed that his DNA had a heart attack or cancer in the cards. Instead his final cadence was a public and horrifying spectacle.

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The last day of his life, Jack Mahler was tragically careless. He was drunk and he was sailing solo, as he usually did. His boat, *Razzle Dazzle*, was a custom forty footer designed for solo offshore racing. It was a dangerous day to be out sailing with wind gusts to fifty knots. The shore near the harbor was rock. It was a lee shore,

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which meant the wind was blowing onto the shore crowded with spectators watching the big seas crash onto the rocks. This crowd would observe Jack's horrific demise.

When it became apparent that the steep breaking waves had Jack's boat in their craw, the spectators saw Jack quickly don a life jacket. He appeared to be waiting, judging the waves. A huge wave lifted the boat to an incredibly steep angle. It teetered at the top of the wave, broached and slammed into the rocks. At the instant the boat hit the rocky shore Jack jumped off the boat. He landed splayed and winded on the top of the rocks. He grasped at sea weed and frantically looked for a crevice in the rocks to secure his position. His life jacket was caught on something preventing him from crawling across the rocks. Two bystanders rushed to the rocks hoping to grab his arms, but the suction of the retreating wave pulled him back into the sea. The next wave pushed Jack's boat against his body. The spectators groaned as the boat and his head cracked against the unyielding granite. The splintering of fiberglass masked the sound of his body being crushed.

Eleanor received the news from Sheriff Peter McAllister, who knocked her door as she was drying her hair. As the deceased spouse, Eleanor was the first to be notified. McAllister was astonished by Eleanor's indifference. Everyone knew Jack lived with Portia, but Eleanor and Jack could be a stunning and gracious couple when social protocol required.

—I knew that his boat would kill him, said Eleanor. He was always taking chances. Testing himself. He wouldn't listen to me, or anyone else. He was an arrogant bastard.

The sheriff assumed it was shock and grief that prompted her remarks.

—Sorry, you will have to identify the body, said the sheriff.

—Why me? said Eleanor. Ask Portia LaBelle to do it. He lives with her. Besides, I don't want to see his mangled body.

—Legally, you must do it.

—I won't and that's that.

McAllister left baffled and insulted by Eleanor's callousness.

When Bea, Jack's first wife, received the phone call from Eleanor, she was roused from a recurring erotic dream: She and Jack having violent but satisfying sex on a rocky shore. Bea was limp as a rag doll and covered in perspiration when she answered the telephone.

—Yes, who is it? she said with more than a touch of annoyance.

—Bea, it's Eleanor. Jack is dead. Killed sailing. Can you come for the funeral, or do I go solo?

—Okay, I'll come, but you'll have to pay my airfare. I'm tapped out, said Bea

—Charge it, I'll give you the money when you arrive.

—I'll see if I can be there tomorrow. I'll call you as soon as I book my flights.

—Don't let me down, Bea. You are his first wife. The press will want to speak to you.

—Did you call Portia, Jack's mistress? said Bea.

—That woman doesn't deserve the courtesy of a phone call, certainly not from me, said Eleanor. She is the *other* woman. Let her read about it in the papers.

—I don't think that's fair. He was a difficult man, but he loved all of us in his way. I'll call her, said Bea. Do you have her number?

—No.

Click.

* * *

Deputy Sheriff Harland Fescue knew that Portia was Jack's mistress. He also knew that Jack had lived at her house for the last three years. It was part of his patrol route. As a courtesy, he felt obliged to inform Portia of Jack's death. Sheriff McAllister had told Fescue that Eleanor, Jack's legal spouse, was indifferent to Jack's death and refused to visit the morgue to identify the body. Would Fescue see if he could have Portia identify the body?

Fescue knocked Portia's door. No answer. Her Porsche and Subaru were in the driveway, parked next to Jack's vintage red

Jaguar XKE. Jack's Ford van was probably at the harbor. Harland walked around to the back of the house and found Portia swimming in her lap pool. He watched her strong freestyle. Jack certainly had a talent for finding classy well-bred woman. Portia was muscled, beautiful, charming, and naked.

Portia saw the shadow of Harland as she came to the end of the pool. Instead of doing a flip turn, she pulled up. Her golden hair fanned out over her shoulders.

—Harland, what brings you here? You need to ogle a naked forty-year-old woman?

Harland turned his back to Portia. He was embarrassed, also excited by the proximity of Portia's nude body.

—I'm here with bad news. Jack has been killed in a sailing accident, he said. He and his boat *Razzle Dazzle* were dashed on Devil's Den Rocks a few hours ago.

—No! That can't be true. Jack was a world class sailor. You must have the wrong guy.

—I'm afraid it's Jack Mahler, Ms. LaBelle. The sheriff asked if you would identify the body.

—Why me? Shouldn't Eleanor do that?

—She won't. She said it was your job. He was living with you.

—Hand me my towel, will you? said Portia, crouching down in the water to hide her nakedness.

Harland took the towel from a chaise longue. Averting his eyes he handed it to Portia. She pulled herself from the pool in one smooth motion and took the towel.

—Give me fifteen minutes; I'll meet you at your car in front, said Portia.

Fescue beat a welcome retreat to the front of the house. The image of naked Portia exiting the pool was atavistic, compelling and exciting. How did Jack Mahler always find these women? Eleanor and Bea were similar to Portia in body and personality. In fact, why did Jack ever change wives and girlfriends? They were all basically the same. Physically, they could have been sisters.

At the morgue, Fescue put his hand under Portia's forearm. He had had bad experiences with people identifying bodies. The morgue attendant lifted the sheet off Jack's head and torso.

—That's him, said Portia flinching. Not pretty. Such a handsome talented man, dashed to jelly.

—There will be a coroner's inquest, a formality, said Fescue. Then the body will be released to next of kin. The Coast Guard might hold up the procedure while they investigate.

—Does that mean Eleanor or ...?

—Eleanor, said the morgue attendant. The legal wife is the usual recipient.

Cerberus Funeral Home took Jack's body. They telephoned Eleanor. She would have to select a coffin and determine the funeral arrangements.

—Tomorrow, said Eleanor. I know his will specified cremation before sundown on the day of his death, but we're a day past that deadline.

—You should choose a casket first. Can you come tomorrow morning?

—I'll be there at noon. She hung up the telephone.

* * *

Eleanor checked her face in the mirror. Maybe she should have colored her hair, though now that she was a widow, some grey wouldn't hurt, it might even add some *gravitas* to her widowhood.

The telephone rang.

—Eleanor Mahler? This is Mitzi Kowalski.

—Oh, sure. Hello, Mitzi. I guess you heard.

—I just saw a report on TV about Jack's accident. I feel I should pay my respects. I lived with him for five years, longer than Bea, his first wife.

—Join the crowd, Mitzi, said Eleanor. He will be disappointed to have missed you. I think you were his favorite. He always spoke of you warmly. But, of course, you are the youngest of his women.

—Be nice, Eleanor, spare me the sarcasm. I come as a friend of you both.

—Sorry, Mitzi, said Eleanor. I'm still in shock. Jack just didn't make those kinds of mistakes. Our big problem will be dealing with his mistress, Portia LaBelle, a tough domineering woman, a big city girl. She wears her golden locks like a Tarnhelm.

—Those women can be difficult, said Mitzi. I once had to deal with Jack's fling with Carla Cruz, the flaming haired Cuban nympho.

—Right. So, when will you arrive?

—I'll fly out from Michigan tonight. My brother, Charlie, owns a plane. We will be in Marblehead tomorrow morning. Charlie and Jack were great friends. Charlie took the news hard.

—Jack would be sorry he couldn't go flying with Charlie. See you tomorrow morning.

Eleanor put a kettle on the stove. A car turned into her driveway then came a knock at the front door. Eleanor wished she hadn't turned on the lights.

—Coming, said Eleanor walking through the dinning room to the front hallway.

She didn't recognize the couple at the door.

—Yes, she said, who are you?

—I'm Terri Marcello, Jack's grad school sweetheart. We heard the awful news on the radio this evening and drove over from Worcester. This is my husband, David Machaon. He's a professor of medicine at U. Mass.

—Come in, I just put on water for tea, said Eleanor acting the part of the bereaved widow, though she was more annoyed than heartbroken by the entire chain of events.

Is *each* of Jack's ex-girlfriends and wives going to show up for the funeral, thought Eleanor with rancor.

* * *

The cheapest casket was Eleanor's choice. No salesman was available to take her order. Just then the tribe of Mahler's women arrived at the funeral home: Portia, Bea, Mitzi and Terri. Each woman was handed a catalog. Choosing Jack's casket was not going to be an easy decision.

—I like the plain wood box on page nineteen, said Eleanor.

—Jack is worth more than that. I rather like the one on page three, said Bea.

—I think not, said Mitzi, I like the one on page five. It's the same price as Eleanor's choice.

—I like Eleanor's choice, said Terri. Jack wasn't flamboyant about things like funerals.

The women continued to bicker. The situation became a verbal uroboros of cattiness, accusations and insult.

—Wait a minute, said Portia over the din. Jack was a heathen. He loved Homer. He loved the funeral rites of classical Greek warriors. I say forget this coffin business. Burn his body naked on a pyre, on the shore where he died. Cremate him like his ancient Greek heroes did their fathers, sons and brethren. Anoint him in oils and perfumes and lay him atop a great pyre, like Achilles did Patroclus, like Priam did Hector. That's Jack Mahler. That's what he would want us to do.

—That's barbaric, said Bea. He deserves a dignified funeral.

—Yes, said Eleanor.

—Stop, said Portia. We all know he loathed the church and religious ceremony. What clergyman would speak over his body, anyway? None I know with any religious conscience.

The funeral director came rushing into the room.

—No, you *cannot* and *must* not burn a corpse outside on a fire. It's illegal, he said, red faced and flustered.

—Give me his body, said Portia. I shall tend to Jack Mahler. His body shall melt on a great ritual fire as did all his classical heroes.

—You are one crazy woman, said the funeral director.

—Crazy you say? said Portia standing and staring the necrologist hard in the eye. Your sort strips the corpse of anything of earthly value, even gold in the teeth. Then you put this human dead body in an industrial blast furnace with euthanized cats, dogs and road kill. That is dignified?

Turning to the women, Portia said: Which of us loved him most? Which of us nurtured his talent? Who was there for him? *All* of us in our time. You bicker over dollars and forget the very soul of the man. The coffin you chose will not shield the man from the flames. I say we wash and anoint his body, place coins on his eyes for the ferryman and light the pyre. The smoke of his body will rest upon the land and sea he loved. You will breathe his soul.

Stillness, as after a great war battle, engulfed the room.

—Please deliver the body to my home, said Portia after a long pause. There will be a wake.

—But madam, that is not *allowed*, said the funeral director.

—By whom?

—Well, ah, it's never happened before, said the funeral director, certainly not here.

—Before your society of grave robbers got rich on death, the tribe of women mourned and cremated their dead. We will take charge.

* * *

The call came into the sheriff's office. There was a big beach bonfire near Devil's Den Rocks. Deputy Sheriff Harland Fescue received the call and drove slowly out to the shore. By the time he arrived at the scene of the fire, a big wind was blowing the glowing ashes out to sea. He left his prowler car and walked closer, eager to take in the spectacle.

Five women were dancing in a circle around the dying embers keening a chilling chant in shrill ululations. They had besmeared their hair and bare breasts with ashes from the fire. A crowd of nearly a hundred watched in the fading light.

Deputy Sheriff Fescue nodded his head slowly, turned and walked back to his car. He would not intrude on the women. Fescue radioed back to headquarters:

—The fire is out. Jack Mahler is at peace.

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*Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
into something rich and strange.*
William Shakespeare: *The Tempest*

