

A woman is shown from the chest down, wearing a vibrant green, short-sleeved dress with a black collar and cuffs. Her hands are clasped in her lap, and she has red lipstick and red nail polish. A small, brown beetle is crawling on the fabric of her dress near her hands. The background is a solid, bright orange color.

Mrs
March

VIRGINIA

FEITO

Mrs. March

A Novel

Virginia Feito



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George March had written another book.

It was a large tome, the cover featuring an old Dutch oil painting of a young handmaiden touching her neck modestly. Mrs. March passed a rather impressive pyramid of hardcovers in the window of one of their neighborhood bookstores. Soon to be heralded as George March's magnum opus, the book was—unbeknownst to her—already creeping its way onto all the bestseller and book club lists, selling out in even the less transited bookshops, and inspiring enthusiastic recommendations among friends. “Have you read George March's new book?” was now the latest cocktail-party conversation starter.

She was on her way to her favorite patisserie—a lovely little place with a red awning and a whitewashed bench in front. The day was chilly, but not unbearably so, and Mrs. March took her time, admiring the now-barren trees lining the streets, the velvet poinsettias bookending storefronts, the lives on display through the townhouse windows.

When she reached the pastry shop, she glanced at her reflection in the glass door before pushing it open and stepping inside, the bell overhead tinkling to announce her arrival. She was immediately flushed by the hot breaths and clammy bodies within, mingled with the heat of the ovens in the kitchen. A generous queue had formed at the counter, snaking around the few scattered tables occupied by couples and convivial

businessmen, all having coffee or breakfast, indifferent to their own loudness.

Mrs. March's pulse quickened with the telltale excitement and wariness that always manifested right before she interacted with others. She joined the line, smiling at the strangers around her, and pulled off her kidskin gloves. A Christmas gift from George two years earlier, they were a very distinct color for gloves: a sort of mint green. She would never have picked that color out, not once believing she could pull such a thing off, but she thrilled at the fantasy that strangers, when they saw her wearing them, would assume her to be the kind of carefree, confident woman who would have selected such a bold color for herself.

George had purchased the gloves at Bloomingdale's, which never ceased to impress her. She'd pictured George at the glove counter, bantering with fawning saleswomen, not in the least embarrassed to be shopping in the women's department. She had once attempted to buy some lingerie at Bloomingdale's. That particular summer day had been sweltering, her shirt sticking to her back and her sandals to the pavement. Sweat seemed to ooze from the very sidewalks.

In the middle of a workday, Bloomingdale's mostly attracted well-to-do housewives—women who approached the clothing racks languidly, pastel pink smiles smeared over frowning lips, looking as if they didn't really want to be there but oh, there was just no way around it, what could one do, really, but try on some clothes and perhaps buy a few. This type of energy proved more intimidating for Mrs. March than the one that pervaded the store in the evenings, when working women threw themselves at the racks with absolutely no grace or dignity, flipping swiftly through the hangers and not caring to pick up the clothes that slid to the floor.

That morning at Bloomingdale's, Mrs. March had been ushered into a large fitting room swathed in pink. A heavy velvet settee sat in a corner next to a private telephone from which she could call the saleswomen, whom she pictured giggling and whispering just outside the door. Everything in the room, including the carpet, was a sappy, sticky pink, like the bubble-gum breath of a fifteen-year-old girl. The bra they had selected for her, dangling provocatively on a silk-padded hanger on the fitting room door, was soft and light and sweet-smelling, like whipped cream. She pressed a lacy piece of string to her face and sniffed it, touched her blouse tentatively, but could not bring herself to undress and try the delicate thing on.

She ended up purchasing her lingerie at a small store downtown owned by a limping, mole-ridden woman who correctly guessed her bra size after one quick look at her fully clothed form. Mrs. March liked the way the woman had pandered to her, complimenting her figure and, better yet, maligning other clients' figures between disappointed *oy veys*. The women in this store gazed at her expensive clothes with perceptible yearning. She never returned to Bloomingdale's.

Now, standing in line at the pastry shop, she looked down at the gloves in her hands, then at her nails, and was dismayed to see that they were dry and cracked. She pulled the kidskin gloves back on and, as she looked up, discovered that somebody had cut right in front of her. Thinking it an obvious mistake, she attempted to determine if the woman was simply greeting someone already in the queue, but no, the woman stood in front of her in silence. Uneasily, Mrs. March debated whether or not to confront the woman. It was rather rude to cut the queue, if that was indeed the woman's intention, but what if she was mistaken? So she said nothing and instead chewed the

inside lining of her mouth—a compulsive habit inherited from her mother—until the woman paid and left, and it was Mrs. March’s turn.

She smiled over the counter at Patricia, the big-haired, red-cheeked woman who managed the shop. She liked Patricia, whom she saw as a sort of plump, foulmouthed yet kindly innkeeper; the type of character who would protect a gaggle of lowly orphans in a Dickens novel.

“Ah, and here’s the most elegant woman in the room!” Patricia said as Mrs. March approached, and Mrs. March beamed and turned to see whether anyone had heard. “The usual, honey?”

“Yes, black olive bread and—well, yes,” she said. “And this time I’d like two boxes of macarons, please? The big ones.”

Patricia scuffled behind the counter, flinging her massive frizz of hair from one shoulder to the other as she gathered the order. Mrs. March took out her pocketbook, still smiling dreamily at Patricia’s compliment, stroking the raised bumps on the ostrich leather with her fingertips.

“I’ve been reading your husband’s book,” said Patricia, temporarily out of sight as she crouched behind the counter. “I bought it two days ago and I’m almost finished. Can’t put it down. It’s great! Truly great.”

Mrs. March moved closer, pressing against the glass case of assorted muffins and cheesecakes, in an effort to hear over the din. “Oh,” she said, unprepared for this exchange. “Well, that’s nice to know. I’m sure George will think it’s nice to know.”

“I was just saying to my sister last night, I know the writer’s wife, and boy must she be proud.”

“Oh, well, yes, although he’s written many books before—”
“But isn’t this the first time he’s based a character on you?”

Mrs. March, still fingering her pocketbook, experienced a sudden numbness. Her face hardened just as her insides seemed to liquefy, so that she feared they might leak out. Patricia, oblivious, set her order on the countertop and tallied up the bill.

"I . . ." said Mrs. March, struck by a sliver of pain in her chest. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . the main character." Patricia smiled.

Mrs. March blinked, her mouth agape, unable to answer, her thoughts sticking to her skull despite her pulling at them, as if they were trapped in tar.

Patricia frowned at the silence. "I could be wrong, of course, but . . . you're both so alike, I just thought—well, I picture you when I read it, I don't know—"

"But . . . the main character, it—isn't she . . ." Mrs. March leaned in and in almost a whisper said, "a *whore*?"

Patricia let out a loud, good-natured laugh at this.

"A whore no one wants to sleep with?" Mrs. March added.

"Well, sure, but that's part of her charm." Patricia's smile faltered when she saw the expression on Mrs. March's face. "But anyway," she continued, "it's not that, it's more . . . the way she says things, her mannerisms, even, or the way she dresses?"

Mrs. March glanced down at her long fur coat, her stockinged ankles and polished tasseled loafers, then back up at Patricia. "But she's a horrible woman," she said. "She's ugly and stupid and everything I would never want to be."

The denial came out a little more visceral than she had intended, and Patricia's doughy face kneaded itself into a look of surprise. "Oh, well . . . I just thought . . ." She frowned and shook her head, and Mrs. March despised her for her imbecilic expression of puzzlement. "I'm sure I'm wrong then. Don't

listen to me, I almost never read anyway, what the hell do I know.” She smiled brightly as if that settled it. “Will that be all, honey?”

Mrs. March swallowed, nauseated, and looked down at the brown paper bags on the counter, which held her olive bread and her breakfast muffins and the macarons she had ordered for the party she was hosting tomorrow evening—an intimate, tasteful affair to celebrate George’s recent publication in the company of their closest friends (or at least their most important ones). She sidled away from the counter, looking down at the gloves clutched in her ugly hands, surprised to discover that she’d taken them off again. “I’m—you know, I think I forgot something,” she said, stepping backward. What was once safe, heavy background noise seemed to have dissipated into conspiratorial whispers. She turned to identify the culprits. At one of the tables, a woman, smiling, caught her eye.

“I’m sorry, I have to see if I—”

Abandoning her bags on the counter, Mrs. March made her way to the exit through the winding line, their murmurs ringing in her ears, their butter-scented breath hot against her skin, their bodies almost pressing against her. With desperate effort she pushed herself out through the door and onto the sidewalk, where the biting air sheeted her lungs and she was unable to breathe. She clutched a nearby tree. As the bell on the patisserie door jingled behind her, Mrs. March hurried to the other side of the street, not wanting to turn in case it was Patricia behind her. Not wanting to turn in case it wasn’t.