

Styx's Crossing

Martha Rivers had reached chubby middle age with a personality as prickly as a cheap, wool blanket. But still, she carried her double chin high. She had a gift few other humans possessed. She could tell when a person was going to die. She could see death like a gray cloud around a person, even from a distance. Her husband, Styx, saw her strange blessing as the curse of his life.

Styx, a name that matched his build, wouldn't have minded so much about Martha, if she quietly told him of her sightings. But every time Martha spotted a person near death, she would scream and upset everyone within miles. Several times a year, Styx would find himself standing in a crowd as his wife circled like an attacking Indian, screeching and pointing at some unlucky soul she saw a cloud surrounding.

It had begun innocently enough, just after they married. Martha saw an old man at the fair and forecasted his death. Everyone was impressed at her amazing prediction, and to Martha's delight, they showered her with attention. As her confidence grew, her tact diminished. She became obsessed with her rare gift and would not even give birth to a child for fear of having to share the talent.

Though Styx never admitted it, Martha's predictions were always right. Even when her eyesight weakened and she refused to wear glasses, she still managed to see death's calling hand. Within days, sometimes hours, after her revelations, the condemned man or woman would pass from this world. Styx always had the feeling the newly departed did so to achieve peace and quiet after Martha's outburst.

Styx never thought of leaving Martha. They were small-town, farm folks who stuck things out to the end. She kept a spotless house and constantly reminded him of his faults where neatness was concerned. He found comfort in working outdoors and loved tinkering and painting. He was forever adding another coat to the trim or planting another flowerbed. His efforts went unpraised, for Martha hated everything about the outside.

Unfortunately, Styx had to be cooped up for days at a time during the winter months. He'd burrow himself into a small corner of the living room and spent most of each day trying to stay out of Martha's way. He lived unhappily with her and watched friends avoid them as they grew older. For as Martha aged, her ranting became louder and, thanks to the abundant supply of aging acquaintances, her predictions grew more common.

One winter afternoon, as Styx read the weekly newspaper for the third time, he heard a violent wail from the bedroom. Seconds later, Martha ran into the living room, yelling as if the devil himself had a hold on her.

“Styx! Styx, I've seen the gray cloud!”

Styx folded his paper with calculated slowness. “Now Martha, calm down. You'll only raise your blood pressure.”

She stormed at him with the gusto of a mad woman half her age. “Styx, you dim-witted fool. We are alone in the house.” She puffed up like a self-righteous toad. “I saw the gray cloud when I looked into the mirror just now.”

Styx's gaze followed his wife as she ran back and forth across the room like a windup toy gone berserk. “Now, don't be ridiculous, Martha. You're healthy as a horse.”

Martha huffed and broke into an unladylike sweat. “You nit-wit,” she screamed, forcing even more blood to her scarlet cheeks. “You’ve never believed in my gift. I’ve been given a great skill, and all you’ve ever done is run my talent down.”

“Now, Marth.” Styx began, filling his pipe and ignoring his wife’s roar. He had not a violent or speedy bone in his thin body. If her anger hadn’t upset him in twenty years, neither would her seeing a gray cloud in the mirror.

“You bothersome whimp. Stop dripping pipe tobacco all over my rug and listen to me!” Martha began moving faster, circling him in a stalking pattern. “You’ve always been envious of my talent, but you’re too spineless to even tell me. You’ve never been able to do anything right in your miserable life, and now, you’re jealous of me.”

Styx drew on his pipe. “Settle down, Martha,” he said between his teeth.

“I will not calm down. I’m fed up with your skepticism.” Her arms began flying around her like blades on a demented windmill.

Her scream grew in volume until the icy windows began to quiver. If it were summer, the neighbors a mile away would be calling to complain. She verbally assaulted him with every word she’d ever seen written on smudged bathroom walls, and still, he only blew white clouds of smoke into the air between them. She doubled her plump fist and ran toward him.

Halfway across the room, she halted as if slamming into an invisible wall. Her hand lowered to her mouth as her cry died in her throat.

Styx watched as Martha's eyes suddenly widened in shock. She clenched her chest violently and gulped frantically for air. She moved half a step, then crumbled to the floor in a mound of fat. Styx watched as she jerked in her now silent dance with death.

As he moved forward, Martha's eyes froze open in an eternal stare. He watched with increasing interest as her normally hot cheeks grew pale, fading into gray.

Styx beat his fireless tobacco into his palm and allowed the ashes to fall on her spotless carpet. He watched her lifeless body for a long moment as if fearing his action might still yet draw some hateful response. But she was as still as stone, and the air around her was quiet and peaceful.

Styx stepped over her dead body and lifted the turpentine bottle from where he'd hidden it behind the couch. He had to clean the gray paint off her mirror before he called the doctor. A slow, easy smile spread across his boney cheeks. For once he'd done something right.