

the
**FEMININE
MYSTIQUE**



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BY JENNIFER SUE

In the heyday of bustling Philadelphia, many of the wealthy sought an area even more elite than Society Hill, they sought a quiet get-away far from the noise and heat of the city. To the north, a beautiful forested area interspersed with farms along the Delaware River beckoned. The village of NEW HOPE became and still is an exclusive community that supports and fosters the arts and a more sedate way of life. Artisans work from their homes. An old mill has been converted into a quaint community theater hosting off Broadway style productions. The town and its environs have become a quiet quality tourist Mecca.

Also along the Delaware River north of Philadelphia is an isolated, seemingly sleepy little community that is a well-kept secret. Founded shortly after the Revolution, the village of Mystique has maintained many of its eighteenth and nineteenth century charms. Up until the 1890's the entire township boasted no more than three hundred souls, virtually all farmers, with a few millers, a blacksmith, and one storekeeper. Then, like the village of New Hope, it attracted the wealthy matrons of Philadelphia as a beautiful site for summer homes far from the heat and dirt of the city. It too has fostered the arts and artisans. Community theater, symphonies, and ballet flourish. Unlike New Hope, it has not become a tourist attraction... the residents have scrupulously avoided attracting outsiders. In Mystique, the feudal-like society of the wealthy has maintained its dominance.

Beginning in 1890 the wealthy began building luxurious summer homes. The men spent little time there while their wives and children stayed the entire summer. Around 1910 many of the wealthy matrons, many widowed, decided to stay there the year round. By the end of the Great War their polite society teas evolved into hotbeds of political debate, especially about Women's right to vote and temperance. These elegant widows, clad black with white lace gloves, ruled their wealthy families and servants with a loving iron hand. Beginning in the year women received the right to vote, the township of Mystique including the unincorporated village by the same name, women were elected to every public office. The area became a matriarchy.

The school board of Mystique revamped the public school system to meet the needs and desires of the wealthy matrons. The school, utilizing donations from the wealthy, forged ahead in all areas. Science labs featured the latest equipment. The library was well stocked and spacious. In the early 1970's every student in grades seventh and up received instructions on how to operate a computer. By 1980, every student from kindergarten on received such education. By 1990, in each classroom there was a computer for every student and teacher. Music and art were stressed while sports, other than tennis and golf, were deemed unnecessary activities that benefited only a few... and those few were generally the type they didn't want elevated to heroic portions. Physical Education classes featured gymnastics, acting, and dance. All students learned the basics of ballet, and in later years, of tap and jazz. Everyone learned to play an instrument and sang in the chorus. In addition, to avoid the competition of fashions, school uniforms were required and five were supplied each year to every student.

Under the dominance of the wealthy women, Mystique Township established one of the first sets of comprehensive zoning ordinances in the country. The entire township was either single or semi-detached home-residential or rural-farm. Businesses already in existence were allowed to continue, new enterprises were allowed only along Mystique's Main Street and all new construction had to be approved by a zoning hearing. In this way, future development was well controlled and the charm of the area was maintained. The explosive housing developments of the late forties and fifties and the sudden unchecked sprawl of modern suburbia was thus avoided. Mystique remained a quiet, elegant, and cultured closed community.

The community playground and park was spacious and tree covered. Sliding boards, swings, and the multitude of other playground equipment and pavilions abounded. The park, bordering the Delaware River, featured an outdoor band shell/stage with awning-covered seating. Everything was immaculately groomed and maintained. While sports fields were part of the park and playground, no organized teams existed. The matrons felt teams inspired unneeded pressures and competition upon the participants and fostered violence and profanity. In accordance with this there were no neighborhood bars where the men could gather to drink and carouse.

This is not to say the community banned consumption of alcohol, in fact several fine restaurants existed with well-stocked bars. It was over-indulgence, especially alcoholism, which was frowned upon. Public drunkenness resulted in a week in jail. Physical abuse, especially of a spouse or child, was harshly condemned and the perpetrators severely punished.

As a result the men who lived in Mystique were polite, caring, and family and community oriented. All others, those tending to be boisterous and overtly macho, had long since moved on to greener pastures. The community strongly discouraged those types from moving into the area. In fact, few people moved in or out of the township. Those already there liked their way of life. The zoning was such that newcomers could only find housing when someone moved out or died. Although a lot of remodeling occurred, there was virtually no new housing. In this way Mystique managed to escape the fate of many other suburban areas, which were forced to allow subsidized housing projects and the problems, they often engendered.

The economy of the area was basic. The main businesses were farms and orchards. Virtually everything else was service oriented to meet the needs and wants of the inhabitants. There was no industry what so ever. The majority of the money flowing into the area came from the wealthy matrons in their mansions.

Linda Weir, despite being a highly trained and qualified nurse, was unable to hold a job due to her husband's constant harassing calls and insane jealousy. Her husband, Peter, was an abusive alcoholic. Things reached a head on Memorial Day. After he broke her arm in a fit of drunken rage, Peter refused to let her seek medical help. Desperately, fearing for her life and that of her ten-year-old son, Hollis, she called the police. When they pulled up before their apartment, she and Hollis dashed out to their protection as the enraged Peter grabbed his shotgun and opened fire on the police. They shot back. Twenty minutes and fifteen police car reinforcements later when the smoke cleared, two officers had been wounded and Peter killed. Linda and her son saw Peter's bullet riddled bloody body before it was slipped into the body bag. Even though dead and glazed, his eyes still defiantly glared out of his angry macho face.

With no income, the temporarily disabled Linda knew she would lose their apartment before she could hope to put her life back together. Her widowed aunt, Kathryn Delp, who lived in a large home in Mystique, invited Linda and Hollis to move in with her as soon as the school year ended. With no other viable option, and since she had always loved visiting her aunt and the quiet community of Mystique, Linda eagerly accepted.

Kathryn Delp was a life-long and well-respected member of the community serving as head librarian at the school library, which also served as the Mystique public library. Remembering her from her childhood visits the community welcomed Linda Weir offering her a well paying nursing position with the MYSTIQUE MEDICAL CLINIC. The only fly in the ointment was Hollis.

Hollis was all boy, with all the nerve rattling tendencies and habits that give boys such an unappetizing reputation. Even though Hollis understood that his abusive and alcoholic father had been wrong, he still tried to emulate him. To put it politely the boy was obnoxious, rude, loud, and belligerent. Hollis bragged to his cohorts that he'd overheard the school secretary suggest they put his name on one of the chairs outside the principal's office. Each year the first thing the teachers did upon getting their new schedules was to check to see if horrid Hollis was in their class. He played midget football and little league baseball, thrilling in the rough and tough aspects of the games. His profane diatribes could almost blister the paint off the benches as he verbally abused not only the umpires and referees but also his teammates. He loved nothing better than rooting for the bad guys on the pro wrestling circuits. They were his heroes. The violent death of his father hit him hard, yet he still admired the dead man for not backing off from the cops.

So you can imagine his shock when he arrived in quiet Mystique to find that every activity and past-time he loved and in which he participated was not only frowned upon but unavailable! His first day at the playground proved quite shocking. Despite his prowling into

virtually every corner of the park, he could find no boys. The only kids his age he saw were a bunch of girls who seemed content to sit beneath the pavilions and work on crafts! Hollis simply walked about the park shaking his head in disbelief as he searched in vain for boys to join in mayhem and havoc creating play. At the bulletin board he eagerly looked for the times the baseball teams practiced. There were none! Times were listed for folk dancing, aerobics, tennis, and even chorus and band rehearsals. Times and dates for story-telling, arts and crafts, even acting and mime classes were listed. By lunch, Hollis wearily trudged home, confused by the absence of boys and manly activities.

"Couldn't you find anything that interested you at the park," asked Aunt Kathryn sweetly as she set out lunch. "I haven't really looked at the schedule this year, but I know they always had plenty to do other years."

"There's a lot going on," Hollis mumbled as he toyed with his soup. "But it's all sissy junk! A bunch of dumb girls sittin' around doin' crafts! Aren't there any guys around here? I couldn't even find a schedule about little league!"

Kathryn sighed quietly. She was well aware of the problems Hollis had in getting along at his former school. Hardly a week went by when he hadn't gotten into at least one fight. That's not even mentioning the many pranks he pulled every day. "Mystique is a lot different than any other place," she told him. "Around here, violence in any form is not condoned. Organized sports such as Little League seem to encourage undo competition and profanity, so we do not sponsor such activities. What is available for children at the park is wholesome, well organized activities to teach and encourage cooperation and growth. Virtually every child participates in the arts and crafts sessions! While the people where you came from might consider such activities to be 'sissy junk' as you called it, in Mystique it's a way of life. I strongly suggest that you change your opinions and interests if you hope to get along here."

"I don't wanna change," Hollis snarled as he slammed his spoon on the table. "I wanna play baseball, I wanna play football, I wanna have fun! You won't catch me messin' around with no sissy junk!"

Kathryn's face grew hard. "Hollis, you're being rude and loud. I will not tolerate that kind of attitude in this house! Now I expect an apology this instant!"

"An apology... for what," questioned Hollis in shocked disbelief as he pushed his chair away from the table and stood defiantly before his great aunt. "I didn't do nothin' wrong! I didn't ask to come live here! You invited us! Why should I have to bow down to your high and mighty ways! You can stick this whole place up your skinny as..."

"SLAP!!!"

Kathryn had moved with a speed that surprised Hollis. His head flew to the side before he could even complete his last word. A bright red imprint of Kathryn's hand glowed on the surprised boy's cheek.

"Go to your room," Kathryn growled with barely controlled rage. "We'll discuss this further when your mother comes home."

Hollis gingerly placed a hand against his cheek. He could readily feel the heat of the bruise. For an old lady, she really packed a wallop! With eyes blazing, but not willing to continue the confrontation, Hollis turned and stumped off to his room.

Going to the window he peered out, judging how difficult it would be to climb out. Not too hard, but why bother? There was nothing out there to do! Never had he seen such a dull place! The guys had to be dorky wimps! No baseball! How did they exist? The tears that had threatened ever since his father died in that adrenalin packed hail of gunfire while he cowered behind a bullet riddled police car with a wounded officer and his mother once more moistened his eyes. It took several deep breaths before he was able to regain control.

As he calmed down he wondered what would happen when his mother came home. She'd whine and cry, like she always did when she thought he was being too tough. Heck, he could handle mom... but Aunt Kathryn... that was another story! She didn't whine... she acted! The slight tingling in his still red cheek reminded him of that! For an old lady, she moved quickly and had hidden strength. She wouldn't be easy to handle.

With a sigh he flopped upon the bed. Brushing an unruly lank of his scraggly blond mop from his eyes he stared at the ceiling, thinking about the kids he'd seen... a bunch of sissy girls doing arts and crafts! And his aunt expected him to join them! Baloney! He wasn't about to be the only guy doing that crap! But where were the guys? What had he missed? There were lots of girls, but no boys. Then he recalled his aunt saying that virtually all the CHILDREN participated in the arts and crafts sessions! But there hadn't been any guys, just girls...

Then a very unsettling thought hit him! At the time he thought there were no boys at the park. But now that he thought about it, maybe some of the kids doing the arts and crafts had been boys... sissy boys! All the kids had hair well past their shoulders, shiny and clean, brushed into ponytails, pigtails, or braids tied



with scrunchies or ribbons. All wore clean coordinated outfits in bright colors, not one wore a raggedly pair of jeans or cut-offs! All had pierced ears and polished nails! His entire body shook with fear and dread as he realized that all the girls wearing skirts had pink ribbons or scrunchies in their hair while the ones wearing shorts had blue ribbons or scrunchies in their hair! The kids in skirts with pink hair ties had to be girls, but what if the kids in shorts and blue hair ties were boys!

That had to be it! The ones with blue hair ties had to be boys! Revulsion and disgust swept over him as he remembered that his aunt had the nerve to tell him the local boys weren't sissies! Ha! Well, they'd never catch him looking like that! Oh, if only dad hadn't been so damn dumb! Anybody with a brain knew you didn't try to shoot it out with the cops! If it hadn't been for his old man's drunken swagger, he'd be back home raising hell with his buddies! He silently damned his deceased father... because of him he was stuck here in this sick dorky place!

When she arrived home from work Linda was not surprised as Kathryn related the incident at lunch. "Well, you can't say I didn't warn you Hollis would be trouble," she stated sheepishly to her stern aunt. "I always liked it here when I was a kid because of the very things Hollis hates. I just don't know how to get him to see this way is better."

"There is only one way to make a boy like Hollis see things differently," Kathryn stated with surety. "Tough love... deny him everything he uses to make himself feel like a man while jamming the things we want him to do down his throat. It's the way things are done here."

Linda looked at her aunt with undisguised surprise bordering on awe. While she knew Aunt Kathryn was strong, she had never seen this side of her. "What do we do," she softly asked in a neophyte to master manner.

"To begin with, we give everything he has to charity," Kathryn stated. "Then we provide him with what we want him to have. He's actually made this part easy for us since most of his things are still in the garage, unpacked, since he didn't feel responsible enough to carry them to his bedroom. I've already loaded it in the back of my car."

"Oh," Linda uttered as she completely yielded control of her wayward son to her feisty aunt.

"Now we go up to his room and read him the riot act," Kathryn continued seeing that Linda voiced no objections. "We tell him to take a bath so we can go shopping. While he's bathing we lay out one set of underwear, a pair of dress pants, shirt, socks and tie shoes, then pack up all his remaining clothes. Once he's dressed, off we go. The first stop will be to drop off all his packed up possessions at the Salvation Army mission box. We'll make sure to have him do most of the work. Then we tell him what we did and what we're going to do. He might scream and fight us but he'll have no choice."

"He won't like it," Linda stated with a shiver as she foresaw the temper tantrum he'd throw.

"He won't have any choice," replied Kathryn with a satisfied smile before she grew quite serious and stared at her favorite niece. "Linda, you have to be stronger than you ever have

been. Hollis will be trying every trick he's ever used to cajole you into letting him escape this. You CAN NOT give him the slightest hope. You have to be hard and cold to the brat... but soft and loving to the child. Never blend the two."

"I understand," Linda stated softly. "This will be my last chance to save him from growing up like his father."

Moments later they knocked loudly on his bedroom door and entered without waiting for a reply. "Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing barging into my room," Hollis snarled as he was startled from his nap. "Hollis, I will not tolerate such language in my home," Kathryn stated in a frosty tone that left Hollis know he would pay for his transgression.

"Aunt Kathryn told me what you did at lunch and now you curse at us. I will no longer tolerate such behavior," Linda scolded the somewhat groggy youth. "You will apologize to her this instant!"

Hollis wiped the sleep from his eyes as he looked with surprise at his mother. Fear filled his gut as he realized the whiny hand wringer was gone, never had his mother been so adamant in her reprimands, but then she had never had Aunt Kathryn to back her up. One look at the stern visage of the old woman behind his mother and he understood that now was not the time to assert his independence. "I'm sorry I swore and insulted you, Aunt Kathryn," he stated softly deciding that it was better to live temporarily as a coward than to die an unsung hero. "But if there were boys with the girls doing the arts and crafts, I still think they're a bunch of sissies!" This last he added louder in a firm voice to let them know he was willing to play their game only to a certain point. Now he'd have to see if they'd let him get away with it. It was difficult for the boy to judge where the lines were now drawn. He had no concept he'd already irrevocably crossed the one line that existed in Mystique

"I accept your apology," Kathryn stated firmly. "But for your sake, I sincerely hope you NEVER are so rude and crude again!" She stared right through the boy until he had to lower his gaze from her withering glare. "If you ever use that sort of language in my house again, I'll wash your mouth out with soap!"

Hollis shivered, he had no problem visualizing the old lady taking him in hand and shoving a bar of soap into his mouth. There was no way he ever wanted to see if she could do it!

With a smile of smug satisfaction upon seeing his fear, Kathryn went on. "Now, to show you there are no hard feelings and to give us a new start, I'll take you shopping after you take a bath."

Hollis looked up, the offer was totally unexpected and had taken him completely off guard. He'd expected a much harder fight about his flapping mouth. The expression upon Aunt Kathryn's face was one of genuine eagerness to go shopping. Maybe she wouldn't be so difficult to handle. "All right," Hollis replied. "It'll only take me a few minutes to get ready." With that he slipped off the bed and padded to the bathroom.

As soon as he was out of the room, Linda laid out his seldom worn dress pants and shirt. Kathryn opened the garbage bags she'd had hidden behind her back and they proceeded to put every piece of his clothing, every toy, and every comic book into the bags. Just as Hollis

finished showering, they carried the bags out to the car and stuffed them into the trunk with the other boxes and bags.

Naturally, Hollis protested when he saw the clothes they'd laid out for him, but one look at Aunt Kathryn convinced him not to argue any further. Quickly, he dressed. While he did so, his mother gathered up the clothes he'd haphazardly discarded in the bathroom. In minutes they were driving down the main thoroughfare of the small town. The few people they saw were friendly and waved.

"There's Helen James and her son," Kathryn stated as she waved at a young mother standing at a corner waiting to cross the street while holding onto the hand of a child. "They live just down the street from us. Kyle is your age and would be a very good first friend. He can show you around town. I'll call later tonight and discuss the matter with Helen."

Hollis stared at what he had been told was a boy in disbelief. The cute freckle-faced child wore yellow shorts, a simple yellow shirt with French cut sleeves, yellow anklets, and yellow sneakers. Blue ribbons held his vivid red haired bouncy ponytail in place high atop the back of his head. Gold earrings dangled smartly from his pierced ears, and his nails were coated with a bright pink polish! To make matters worse, he recognized him as one of the kids he'd seen doing the arts and crafts at the park! His suspicions were confirmed! If what Aunt Kathryn had said about the boys being at the park with the girls, then all the guys had been dressed like Kyle. ALL the guys were sissies! There was no way he wanted to be shown about town by that faggot! But the tone of voice that Aunt Kathryn had used in pointing out the boy and his mother left him know that now was not the time to state his feelings. Glumly he settled back in his seat, refusing to look at anyone else for fear of seeing more sissy boys!

Roused from his fuming state of mind, Hollis was easily coerced into removing the many bags in the trunk of the car. All Aunt Kathryn had to do was appeal to his manliness to get the job done, especially in light of what Hollis thought of the sissy boys of Mystique. Hollis strutted his manly stuff to show he was no sissy as he filled the Salvation Army charity box located near the post office. Ten minutes later they pulled up before a quaint boutique. Hollis quietly shuddered as he read the name: CHERISHED MEMORIES CHILDREN'S CLOTHIER. The display window was filled with cute dresses and hats.

"You're not taking me shopping here, are you," he asked fearing that he already knew the answer.

"Of course," replied Kathryn. "CHERISHED MEMORIES is the finest shop in Mystique. It's the perfect place to get you a new wardrobe."

"But I don't need a new wardrobe," Hollis stated with growing worry as he slumped in his seat. "My old clothes are just fine."

"Heavens no," Kathryn responded sounding appalled by the very notion. "Besides, the only clothes you have are what you're wearing. Just what did you think was in all those bags you just dropped into the donation box?"

"What," Hollis stated as he sat up in wide-eyed surprise. "You mean you threw out all my clothes?"