

# *Bluffton's Thorny Rose*



*F*or those of you who knew her - knew her, Mary Graves was a Bluffton purist. You "got" her, and knew that the easiest path with Mary was sometimes to just avoid her. For those of you who didn't know her, well...all I can say is you missed out on a legend. Love her or not, Mary was a cornerstone of this town of ours. Bluffton would not be what it is today without her, and, sadly, it will never be the same.

The following preface is for a compilation I kept thinking about putting together. The idea is several years old and the preface is dated late 2006. I will forever regret that I was too lazy to finish it and that I will never have the chance to present the gift to Mary Graves in person.

Mary died on January 5, 2009. Mark that day on your calendars as the day Bluffton changed forever.

#### *Preface*

*I'm a fraud. An impostor.*

*I don't have an original thought in my head.*

*That's why I was so surprised in the summer of 2002 when a lady I had only met once asked me if I would pen a gardening article for her magazine.*

*"But I don't know anything about gardening," I warned. "Come over and see my beds at home if you want proof."*

*"I thought you went to Clemson for horticulture and your family owns a nursery," she countered.*

*"Well, yeah, but I didn't graduate with a horticulture degree. Besides, my dad could be Henry Ford but that wouldn't necessarily mean I could build a car."*

*"That's perfect!" Donna squealed in her raspy voice.*

*"What's perfect?" I asked, feeling suddenly committed to something, but not knowing what.*

*"Do you write like that?" she asked.*

*"Like what?"*

*"Like how you talk," she said.*

*"How do I talk?" I asked. Confusion was mounting.*

*"Perfect!" she repeated. "Deadline's the 17th."*

*And then she walked away.*

On Friday evening, the day before the 2005 Village Festival in Bluffton, I was hanging out at my friend Jamie's wine and beer store, Scuppernongs. I walked over to the beer cooler and, feeling like a gangster or a cowboy, I grabbed something I'd never heard of and opened it without paying for it first

-- one of the delights of living in downtown Bluffton and knowing the shopkeepers. I was shooting the breeze with Don, Jamie's father. Babbie, Jamie's mom, and the organizer of the festival, buzzed around like a honeybee in an azalea as she made signs to mark vendor spots on the sidewalk.

I was keeping a keen eye down the road at the corner of Bridge and Calhoun Streets for the Wertz Antique guys. These two guys from Ohio show up every year with a truckload of junk that they rescue from old barn sales throughout the country. They always have great stuff like old potties, tobacco fences, and feeding troughs and I was determined to get to them before Anna Sharp and Nancy Golsen (two local collectors) had an opportunity to empty the truck before I could check it out. It's part of our festival ritual to "preview" the merchandise the night before the festival and sales begin on Saturday. The Wertz guys usually had three-quarters of their junk sold before the sun set on Friday.

I was getting more and more nervous as the time crept by that I would miss my opportunity, so I drained my beer, laid a couple of bucks on Jamie's register and trotted down the road towards Wertz's spot, even though they weren't around.

On the other side of Calhoun Street, where Wertz would park and set up his wares is my sister's home, the Fripp-Louden house. I am typically not a jealous man, given the fortune and blessings that God has already bestowed on me, but I do turn six shades of envious green when I am around my sister's house. Built in 1909, the Fripp-Louden house is classic Lowcountry architecture with a sprawling and deep front porch under a canopy of majestic 300-year-old live oaks. The house is situated on the only residential corner smack dab in the center of town. From her front porch, someone could survey all of the goings on around town while maintaining invisibility behind a veil of eighty-year-old camellias and stately front gardens.

I was surprised on this warm evening to see a small gaggle of people congregating on the street corner, my sister in the middle, rather than sipping glasses of Chardonnay on her front porch, as usual. Among them were a couple of out of town guests, my niece and brother-in-law, and none other than Miss Mary Graves.

Mary had one hand on a brick column of my sister's front fence, and the other was on her hip as she surveyed some folks getting dangerously close to transgressing her strictly-off-limits yard. (And for the record, there is only one place I covet more

than my sister's house and that's Mary's. Across the street from my sister, and one lot closer to the river, Mary's house is a massive and classic two story Lowcountry home with a wrap around porch.)

Mary is the uncontested matriarch of our town, though she is also the most feared individual living in the Original Square Mile. Mary is in her 80s, has never been married, and spent her life as a physical therapist with a focus on the hand. She spends her time studying and drawing the hand when she's not challenging the town or individuals to accept responsibility for their ineptness. Her opinions are her convictions, and right or wrong, she is well prepared to support her arguments. Not to mention that when she has been riled up, she's downright as fierce as a pit bull. One poor unsuspecting real estate speculator approached her to sell her house (which is in poor repair) to him. There was no confusion about her disgust for the man, and if he has stopped running to this day, I'll be surprised. The last he saw of Mary was the barrel of her pistol.

As I approached the crowd on the street corner from the rear, I realized that many misunderstanding folks would avoid getting too close to Mary, and would perhaps even turn around and head back upstream to wherever they came. Feeling I was close enough in my relationship with Mary to chance it, I put my arm around her unsuspecting shoulder.

Mary whipped around and for a moment I was convinced she had a shank and was about to cut me. I bravely kept my hand on her shoulder and pulled her into a friendly one-armed hug. She slowly looked down at my hand on her shoulder as the foreign object it was, and then just as slowly up to my face. "Am I supposed to know you?" she half asked, half demanded.

Thinking my friendly gesture was really an egregious mistake; I quickly removed my hand and shuffled from foot to foot. "I'm the uglier half of her family," I said, pointing to my sister. Not only were my sister and Mary good friends, they were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

"Ooohhh! Mitchell!," she remembered, as a flood of relief eased over me and I felt my bladder ready to release like a dog peeing on itself after knowing it's not in trouble. "I didn't know who that good lookin' man was with his arm around me."

"We need to get your eyes checked then, Miss Mary, if you think I'm good looking," I teased.

"Shah," was her reply to anything she disagreed with.



I fell into easy conversation with Mary discussing politics and the church (or the Who's Who crowd of our town as she called it), her two favorite subjects. I thought it sad that many people didn't give Mary a chance in this town. Mary is abrasive and sharp and is known for not hold-

ing any punches; her opinions will be heard, like it or not! But I have learned that though we may not agree on everything, her arguments all have merit and each one is certainly well thought out. Mary, having been here nearly all her life, has never asked for the changes that are occurring daily in our quaint little town, and it would take hell and high water to get her to go along with any of it, and maybe not even then. She's got fire and conviction, and I like that. It's a lot more than I can say for some other pussy-footers around Southern Beaufort County, many of which are our "leaders."

While we stood there solving the town's problems, the Wertz guys had parked their truck and I could hear Nancy Golson shrill, "Ooooh! I've GOT to have that! What is it?" I noticed our street corner



crowd had vanished and my sister and her guests were across the street making a stockpile. I thought for a second of breaking off my conversation with Mary, but quickly calculated that our conversation was so much more valuable than that old barn stuff across the road. My decision to stay paid off immediately.

"I enjoy your gardening articles. I read them every month. You write wonderfully," she said.

It took me a minute to fully realize what a terrific compliment I had just received. The breath prior to this compliment was a complaint about local development.

I have been complimented before for my articles, but I figured it was because people had to. My friends give me kudos, but sure...they had to. I was forever fishing one out of my family. And Donna, the editor, had to praise me so she could keep her gardening section in print.

"Why, thank you, Mary," I said with sincerity. "That's very kind of you."

"Shah," she replied, with dismissal. "I'm not kind. You know that. I'm just honest. And you write well."

Of all the compliments I have received this is one that I cherish most. Her words, distinct and clearly spoken, remain sweet in my ears even today. An autographed first edition copy of Pat Conroy's *The Lords of Discipline* with the inscription "For the love of writing and books, and the Lowcountry of South Carolina -- I'm waiting for your writing" remains the greatest source of encouragement and inspiration. But Mary's words, "I'm not kind. I'm honest. You write well," is my greatest achievement of validation.

Mary Graves suggested I compile my magazine articles into a small book. This is that compilation. Of course, after a compliment with the significance of hers, she could have told me to run naked down to the public dock, burn it down to the water while singing Himalayan folks songs and I probably would have done it.

This is my gardening book. The first? Sure. The last? Who knows? Y'all might read this and say, "He was right. He don't know squat!" And you'd probably be right.

But I do have one fan. And this is for her. 🍷

*When you are reluctant to change, think of the beauty of autumn.*

*-V B Brown*