

*Elizabeth Brewster*

## **A House Full of Women**

The Grandmother, the Mother, and the Girl lived together in a white house with green trimmings on Charlotte Street in the little town of Milton. It was a smallish house, but comfortable enough. Downstairs, when you came in the front door and turned to the right, there was a room that was a combined parlour and dining room, with a heavy dark dining table and chairs, a large rocking chair for the Grandmother, and a couch, covered with flounced floral cretonne, on which the Grandmother sometimes snoozed or the Girl sometimes curled up to read or study. On the other side of this room was the kitchen, with its wood stove and its sturdy deal table covered with linoleum, off which they ate most of their meals unless there was company or it was somebody's birthday.

The Mother slept downstairs, in a room to the left of the hall stairs, facing the street, a room which might have been intended as a front parlour when the house was first built. The Girl and the Grandmother each had a large room upstairs. The Grandmother's was next to the bathroom, so that she could reach it readily at night. Off the Grandmother's room was a tiny cubbyhole, used for storage, which could double if necessary as a guest room. The Girl's room was in the front of the house, with a bow window looking out onto the street. It was large and airy, with a double bed and a big closet, and the Grandmother sometimes told the Girl she was lucky to have it all to herself, now that her elder sister had left home to work.

There were no men in the house. The Father, who had been the Grandmother's Son, was dead. The Grandfather had died long before the Girl was born, and had not been of much account anyway. The Grandmother had for many years run a large boarding house. After she had sold it, she had bought this smaller house, in which she had lived for a time, with her son, her daughter-in-law, and her two young granddaughters. Now the two women and the young girl were left in the house by themselves.

Milton, while the Girl was growing up, was a peaceful, rather dull little market town in the midst of farming country. There was a dairy, which boasted that it manufactured the best ice cream in the Province, and a company which bottled ginger ale and the local mineral water. The streets were lined with elms and maples; the houses were trim and well-painted, with clumps of flowers—pansies or bleeding heart—in the front and large vegetable gardens in the rear.

However, just at this point in time, when the Girl was fifteen and was attending the local high school, the town was not as peaceful as usual. A War was in progress. Men were fighting and bombs were falling in Europe and Asia; and it was necessary for the men of the Country, of the Province, and of Milton to go off and Save Democracy. Indeed, Milton was of special importance in the War. It became the site of a military camp, a camp which had a much larger population than that of the little town itself. The soldiers paraded through the streets, flaunting their uniforms. They overwhelmed the shops and eating places, or they prowled the sidewalks in search of girls, of whom there were not enough to go around.

Even in the house on Charlotte Street the War had its effect. The Mother cooked doughnuts in a pan of sizzling fat on top of the kitchen stove, and sold them fresh every day to the military canteen at the camp, although she herself never visited the camp. An old friend of her husband's, now in charge of the canteen, sent a man every afternoon to pick them up from her, or sometimes picked them up himself. The Grandmother fretted—she did not like the smell of doughnuts and cooking-grease—but could not object vehemently to her daughter-in-law's earning money from work which did not take her out of the house.

One morning in early September, after Stella, the Girl, had gone off to school, and when Maud Vining, the Mother, had already started on her morning's task of making doughnuts, the Grandmother came downstairs for her late, leisurely breakfast. When Maud heard her on the stairs, she hurried through the dining room into the hall so that she could watch the Grandmother's slow, elaborate descent, walking backward and clutching the rails, her cane in one hand. She did not know what she could do if the Grandmother fell, but felt, somehow, that she could preserve her from falling by watching her.

The Grandmother, helped by the Mother, found her way to the kitchen, where she sat down at the far end of the deal table, awaiting her breakfast. As always, she looked, except for her massive size, like the imaginary ideal of an old lady: snowy hair; a round, china-pink face with delicate skin, a scarcely-wrinkled brow, and a pink rosebud of a

mouth, which could, however, tighten and harden when the owner did not get her way. She was dressed immaculately, as usual, wearing this morning a flowered cotton dress which the Mother had sewn, and a pink woolen shawl tucked comfortably around her shoulders. Every hair in its place, the Mother noted, conscious of her own hair, which (although of course she had combed it before breakfast) was now straggling wispily into her eyes. Already a spot of grease had splattered onto the apron she had put on to protect her house dress.

The Mother poured a cup of tea for the Grandmother from the teapot which always stood at the back of the wood stove, and gave her the bowl of shredded wheat and the toast and soft-boiled egg she liked for breakfast.

As the Grandmother sipped her tea, she turned over the pages of the weekly newspaper, which had arrived the afternoon before, and quoted bits of local news which the Mother had already read.

She's unusually friendly and chipper this morning, the Mother thought, looking warily at her mother-in-law.

The Grandmother began to read the ads, in search of bargains or information.

"Room rents are getting to be very high, aren't they, Maud?" she said at length, taking a sip of tea.

"Yes, I suppose they are. So many of the army wives are coming to be with their husbands, and rooms are all they can get."

The Grandmother crunched thoughtfully at her toast. "I wonder," she said, "if it wouldn't be the patriotic thing for me to rent a room."

The Mother looked up from turning the doughnuts with a fork and stared at her. "What room would you rent?" she asked. "There's only that poky little room off yours, and a person would have to be pretty hard-put for space to take it."

"Yes, of course it would be very small for an adult. But why couldn't Stella move into it? She's only a child and doesn't need so much room. Then I could rent her room to a soldier's wife. It would be patriotic. We shouldn't hold on to space when others need it."

Patriotic my foot, Maud thought. What she wants is the money.

"Stella's not a child," she said. "She's in high school now. She needs the room."

"She doesn't really need it," the Grandmother argued. "I never even had a room to myself when I was a girl, let alone a big room like that with a double bed. The little room next to me will be big enough for her to sleep in, and she studies down here most evenings anyway."

"I don't like strangers in the house, especially with a young girl like Stella growing up. How do we know what they'll be like or who they'll bring in?"

"Oh Maud, you coddle Stella too much. Good for her to see a little life in the house. It'd only be one woman, and what harm could one soldier's wife—an officer's wife, maybe—do the girl? We'd look her over first, wouldn't we?"

"That little room's full of junk. Where are we to store it so that Stella can sleep there? And who's to do all the work? Is your high-and-mighty officer's wife going to do her own room? It's all I can do to get Stella to do it."

"Well, Maud, it was just an idea. I'm sorry you're so unpatriotic and selfish. I would have thought you'd have been willing to help some poor soldier's wife be near her husband so he wouldn't be chasing around after all the schoolgirls in town. And we could stand the money. But never mind."

She turned the page of the newspaper, and went on reading silently to herself, her lips moving. She appeared to have closed the subject, but Maud looked at her warily. You could never tell what the old woman might be up to.

When next week's paper came to the house in the afternoon, the Grandmother, who was sitting in her big chair in the dining room, managed to reach it before her daughter-in-law came in from the kitchen. "See, Maud," she said triumphantly, "they already have my ad in."

"What ad?" Maud asked blankly, standing at the kitchen door.

"My ad for the room, of course. Oh, Maud, don't look so mad. It's my own house—I do have a right to rent a room in it. Maybe no one will come, anyway."

People did come, of course. The first was a middle-aged woman, an officer's wife, who looked at the room critically and decided that the clothes closet was not big enough and the furniture was old-fashioned without being antique. She could find something better, she thought. The second was a young girl from the country, a private's wife, who liked it very much indeed—such a lot of space, such a good view from the bow window—but who could not afford as much money as the Grandmother was asking.

Finally a man came to view it, a Sergeant Rumble, who said he wanted it for his wife, who was moving to Milton shortly to be near him. He was a rotund, pompous man in his forties, with a military manner. He inspected the room carefully, sat down bouncingly on the bed to test its

springs, tried the windows to make sure they would open without difficulty, peered into the closet, and said he thought the room would do nicely for his wife. He paid the Grandmother a month's rent in advance, and said his wife would be arriving next week from the city.

"Perhaps she won't like it when she comes," the Mother said hopefully to Stella. She expected a woman who would be Sergeant Rumble's female counterpart, a sturdy, military-looking woman of thirty-nine or forty, with definite opinions on what a room ought to be like.

Gladys Rumble, when she arrived, was something of a surprise. She was much younger than her husband, somewhere in her early twenties, a pretty girl with pale brown hair and light brown eyes. She was dressed becomingly but quietly, wore almost no make-up, and seemed demure, almost prim, in manner. She appeared to be devoted to Sergeant Rumble, and Maud Vining decided she must be a fairly recent bride. "I can't see why she took him," she said to Stella. "I'd have thought she could do better, but love is blind."

Even though she had not wanted young Mrs. Rumble in the room, the Mother rather took to her at first. She was pleasant but not too pushy, took care of her own room, prepared her own breakfast without getting in other people's way, and ate her other meals out of the house. She took a polite interest in the Grandmother's scrapbooks of Royalty, the Mother's cooking, and the Girl's clothes and lessons. Sergeant Rumble was under foot more than the Mother liked; but, after all, it was good to see a married couple so devoted. If she had not been worried about Stella, she would have been well enough satisfied.

Stella, she thought, seemed tired and dispirited lately.

"Aren't you sleeping well, Stella?" she asked her one evening when Stella was helping her with the dishes. "Are you working too hard at school?"

"It's that little room, Mum," Stella said, "I can hear everything in Grandma's room, I'm so close. She snores and talks in her sleep. And I can hear things in the other room, too."

"What things, Stella?"

"Oh well, just the Rumbles laughing and making noises. Does he beat her, Mum, do you think?"

"Beat her? Oh, no, I can't imagine that. Just pull the covers up and try not to hear."

"I don't like that Sergeant Rumble," Stella told her mother another evening. "I was taking a bath last night, and I had closed the door but hadn't locked it because you know the lock doesn't work and nobody ever comes in. But Sergeant Rumble came in. He barged right in and stood there."

"I suppose he didn't know you were there, Dear."

"Well, but he didn't rush out as soon as he saw me. He stood there and just looked, really stared at me. I almost had to tell him to leave."

"Poor Mrs. Rumble. He must have a wandering eye. We'll have to get the lock fixed, and don't you ever talk to him."

"I don't want to talk to him. That old man."

"I think they drink in the room." Stella said another time.

"And there's another man, a friend of Sergeant Rumble's, who comes along with him."

"I don't think Gladys drinks," the Mother said. "I suppose he drinks with his friend, and she can't prevent him. So long as they don't get drunk and ruin the furniture. Your Grandma wouldn't like that—serve her right."

In October Stella took the measles, and the Mother brought her down to her own room so that she wouldn't have to carry her meals upstairs to her. Gladys brought her portable radio downstairs for Stella, who was lying in the darkened room, unable to read. Stella thanked her, but turned the radio off when Gladys left the room. "The music hurts my ears, Mum," she said. "I'd rather just listen to the quiet."

When she was well, she did not move upstairs again to the little room. She continued to share her mother's bed, though she studied late on the couch in the dining room. Sometimes she fell asleep there, the book she was reading dropped from her hand, and the Mother would come out and throw a blanket over her. At such times, looking at the thin young body and the pale face under the tangle of fair hair, the Mother would yearn to reach forward into the Girl's future and protect her from any danger that might be waiting there.

"Mum, I don't know whether I should tell you," Stella said to her mother one morning in November before she went to school. "That other man, Sergeant Rumble's friend, stayed with Mrs. Rumble over night, and Sergeant Rumble wasn't there. I saw the man leaving this morning. He woke me up stumbling down the stairs, and I got up and turned on the light and saw him."

Maud looked at her in surprise. "Are you sure it wasn't Sergeant Rumble?" she asked carefully. "Do you know what you're saying, Stella? About Gladys?"

"Yes, I do know what I'm saying. It wasn't Sergeant Rumble. I don't like that woman, Mum. She's sneaky."

"Well, she's your Grandmother's roomer. I can't get rid of her myself, but I'll speak to Grandma."



"I don't believe it, Maud," the old woman said angrily, when the Mother recounted Stella's discovery to her. "The girl's mistaken. You know what young girls are at that age. Full of fancies. Jealous of a young married woman like Mrs. Rumble, maybe."

"You know that's not true. Stella's a very truthful girl. You're fonder of money than of your own granddaughter, that's what it is."

"Well, maybe I am. At least the woman's room is paid for. She can do what she likes in her own room, can't she?"

"Oh, so Stella and I don't pay rent, is that what you're saying? So who cooks your meals and cleans the house and washes your clothes for you? How do you think you'd manage if Stella and I walked out?"

"Well, Maud, keep your shirt on, don't go flying off the handle all over the place. I know I need you, and you need a place to live too. Can't we get more proof before putting her out, though?"

"Well," Maud said to her husband's friend Harry, from the army canteen, when he came to pick up her doughnuts, "Who would ever have thought that Grandma Vining, who has always been so proper, would not care whether her roomer was entertaining other men besides her husband all night? Of course, I always thought Sergeant Rumble was too old for the girl, and I suppose she found that out after she married him. I'm sorry for her in a way."

"And how do you know the girl's married to Sergeant Rumble at all, Maud?" Harry asked, winking.

"What do you mean, Harry? Do you know anything about her?"

"Not much. But enough about Rumble to know he has a wife in Moncton, much around your age, and a couple of half-grown boys."

"Harry, have you known that all along? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't know you'd want to know. Minding my own business. The girl's a common prostitute, to my mind. Easy enough to get rid of, if you want to, even if the old woman is being stubborn. A word here, a word there, and the girl will be arrested."

"I don't know if I want—Still, I have to look after Stella, don't I? All this has been bad for Stella. But I'd rather she'd just leave town. Maybe if I spoke to her myself."

But she did not need to speak to her. That evening Gladys came in by herself, without either Sergeant Rumble or his friend. She stood in the door of the dining room, her gaze taking in the Mother at her mending, the Grandmother with a crossword puzzle, Stella with her algebra text propped up in front of her. She had changed her muted lipstick for a very bright shade.

"Well, Mrs. Vining," she said, "I'm sorry I'll have to be leaving tomorrow. My mother-in-law—Sergeant Rumble's mother, that is—is very sick and wants me to be with her. She's a lovely lady, just like a real mother to me, and I want to help her out. I think it may be a long sickness, so you'd better rent the room to someone else."

The Grandmother looked up from her crossword, startled. The Mother was silent for a moment. (She knows we know, she thought. The man must've told her Stella turned on the light. Or did Harry see that she was warned?) "I'm sorry to hear that, Mrs. Rumble," she said. "We'll miss you, and so will the Sergeant, I'm sure, but we all have to take care of our own when they need us, don't we?"

"Yes, we do. Well, I'll be taking that early morning train, and I guess the rent's all paid, so I don't need to see you again. Thanks for everything. And good luck with your lessons, Stella."

Stella looked up without answering. Maud could not guess what her thoughts might be.

In the morning the Mother and Stella ate breakfast together. Gladys had already left for the station. The Grandmother was not yet up.

"Well, she had her good qualities, in spite of everything," Maud said. "She was always neat and tidy, and had a pleasant smile."

"She always had very pretty dressing gowns," Stella said. And sighed.

The Mother glanced at her. "Handsome is as handsome does," she said vaguely, "I'm glad to see the last of her, whatever her good qualities."

Shortly before Christmas the Mother met Sergeant Rumble and his wife on the street. His real wife, that is. A stout woman with a strong jaw. Sergeant Rumble did not recognize Maud, or at any rate did not appear to.

In the New Year Sergeant Rumble and his friend and most of the men in the camp were sent overseas. A new group of soldiers invaded the town. One or two of them knocked at the door of the house on Charlotte Street, inquiring about rooms for their wives, but the Grandmother refused to rent the room again. The Mother moved upstairs to the room where Gladys had slept and left the downstairs room for Stella. The room, she explained to herself, seemed hardly suitable for a young girl any longer.

Getting ready for bed, standing in front of the old gilt-framed mirror in her faded navy blue dressing gown, brushing her graying hair, she wondered where Gladys was now. And, stretched out in the big double bed, where Gladys had entertained Sergeant Rumble and his friend, and where she herself had once slept with her own husband, she thought



about Gladys, and the real Mrs. Rumble, and Gladys's invented mother-in-law, and her own mother-in-law and Stella, asleep in the room just under her. Why, she wondered, were some women's lives so different from other women's lives? But you could never answer that.

The room was cold. It must be the coldest room in the house, and something was wrong with the furnace again. She must see about that in the morning. Meanwhile, she pulled the blankets tight around her and shivered.