



Margaret Rodenberg

## MRS. MORRISETTE

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Mrs. Morrisette had taken to sunbathing in the nude. Mr. Morrisette blamed it on those damn Frenchies. One vacation on St. Barts and suddenly Mrs. Morrisette was a nudist.

It all started the first day. After a hotel breakfast of croissants and lukewarm coffee, they had claimed two of the lounge chairs that dotted the narrow strip of sand between the modest Hotel Emeraude and the sparkling Baie de St. Jean.

"If you don't get to the beach early," Mr. Morrisette had said during breakfast and again as he hurried his wife down the sandy path, "all the good chairs are taken."

Mr. Morrisette, glad though he was to be out of the January cold, would have preferred the direct flight to their usual condo in Miami over the twelve-hour three-flight marathon they'd endured to reach that insignificant speck in the French Antilles. Travel is hard enough on people our age without dragging us to some foreign place we've never been, he had said to Mrs. Morrisette in the weeks leading up to their winter vacation. Mrs. Morrisette, insisting the island was perfectly lovely and highly recommended, had bought nonrefundable tickets.

Now, stretched out on his lounge chair, marveling at a windsurfer's scoot across the bay, listening to gulls gah-gah, Mr. Morrisette was inclined to agree: It was lovely. And since nearly everyone spoke English, and their tiny suite in the low-rise hotel was nicer than what they could afford in the States, he was ready to stop complaining. He took off his sandals and anklets and, pointing his toes toward the water, toasted his legs in the sun.

Down the beach was the end of the airport runway where propeller planes, bearing sunburned tourists, popped into the sky. Up the beach, the tony Hotel Eden Roc perched on a promontory, and in front of him, sunbathers promenaded, their feet washed in gentle waves. He pulled a sunglass flip-cover out of his shirt pocket and clipped it to his glasses.

Relishing the sight of women, young and old, slim and plump, strolling the narrow beach, breasts fully exposed to Caribbean sun (perhaps those Frenchies had it right after all), he turned to comment to Mrs. Morrisette on the variety of bosom shapes (“You could do a scientific study, my dear, something on the order of phrenology, using calipers . . .”), only to find his wife pulling down the straps of her navy blue, one-piece, skirted bathing suit. As he watched, his mouth corked with horror, she maneuvered her arms through the straps and folded down the top so that the fleshy rubber cups lay empty and open to the sky like offering bowls on the altar of her plump tummy. Her large white breasts, breasts he, her husband of forty-six years, rarely saw without a Maidenform, were dangling out en plein air.

“This is something I couldn’t do at home, isn’t it, dear?” she said, squirting out more suntan lotion.

“For God’s sake, Emma, cover up. You shouldn’t do it here, either,” he said.

“Lower your voice. Everyone is staring.”

“Of course, they’re staring—you look like something gone wrong out of *National Geographic*.”

“It’s a French island, dear. Everyone is doing it.”

“My God, what if we run into someone we know?” He peered around the beach.

“Who do we know that would ever come here?” she said. “I can’t tell you how nice it feels. Just lovely.”

Mr. Morrisette opened and shut his mouth.

“Really, dear, you look like a carp.” She lay back down and shut her eyes.

His wife's ample bosoms wobbled like poached eggs just delivered to the table. As they settled to rest, the nipples slid to opposite sides, giving her chest a wall-eyed look. Mr. Morrisette twisted away. His temples pulsed and his teeth ached. The ocean didn't seem so remarkably turquoise and the beach wasn't the pink the brochure promised. He pulled his golf hat down low. His eyes patrolled the beach.

He squinted. "My God, that's not the Farleys," he said. "Where?" asked Mrs. Morrisette, bolting upright.

"For God's sake, Emma, lie back down. No, no, it's not them. Never mind."

Mrs. Morrisette lay down and fell asleep, her breasts lightly pinking. Mr. Morrisette retrieved binoculars from the basket and spent the morning scanning the beach for familiar faces.

That afternoon, he took a nap under the hum of the ceiling fan while Mrs. Morrisette walked to town. He awoke to the rustle of paper bags.

"Oh, my dear," Mrs. Morrisette said. "I wish you had come with me. Rows of lovely shops—so continental." She had bought him a St. Barts T-shirt and, for herself, a pink flowery muumuu and matching bikini.

"You'd never find one in my size at home," she said.

The next day, Mr. Morrisette wondered aloud why she had paid for both pieces if she only planned to wear the bottom. That night, Mrs. Morrisette didn't sleep well and in the morning, her breasts were strawberry red. She stood before the mirror, in her flowered bikini bottom, pouting.

"Better than Christmas—a double Rudolph," Mr. Morrisette said, his hand over his mouth. "You'd better cover up."

Mrs. Morrisette put on her muumuu, loaded up her basket, and led Mr. Morrisette to the beach. She found two lounge chairs under an umbrella.

"I'll feel better in the breeze," she said, unbuttoning

the muumuu.

Mr. Morrisette scanned the beach. He felt pressure from his morning coffee.

“I need to go to the room,” he said.

“Fine, dear. I’ll wait here,” Mrs. Morrisette said.

“For God’s sake, cover up while I’m gone. What if someone comes by?”

“Who’s going to bother an old lady? I’ll be fine.” She put her straw hat over her face.

Mr. Morrisette, staring down at the circle of her brim perched next to her round nipples above the ovals of her red breasts, felt his head spin. Below her breasts, his wife’s body spread out wider and wider until tapering in above her knees. It was soft and lumpy, an old couch you had to know to find comfortable. There was a mole above her navel—he’d forgotten that. Notwithstanding today’s standards, it was a perfectly acceptable body, but it didn’t need to be seen.

He moved his chair closer into the shade. His bladder swelled and tightened. He crossed his legs. Tossing aside his magazine, he rolled from one buttock to the other.

“It’s your prostate, dear,” said Mrs. Morrisette, lifting the hat. “Why don’t you pee in the ocean?”

“I hate to pee in the ocean,” he said. “I’d have to swim around so it’s not obvious what I’m doing. I hate to go in the ocean.”

“No one’s paying attention. Don’t be shy.”

“Maybe I should pee against the umbrella pole, since we’re so busy making spectacles of ourselves,” he said.

“Whatever makes you happy, my dear,” said Mrs. Morrisette from under her hat.

Her skin had begun to peel from the tip of her pink nose to the arches of her salmon feet. She had dragged him to the far end of the island, to Colombier Beach where people don’t wear tops or bottoms, and where she had humiliated him by swimming completely naked. He had gotten sick

eating shellfish flown in from Brittany and he would have given all the croissants on the island for a bowl of Shredded Wheat. She had paid \$80 to have her hair cut by a man named Christophe who looked and smelled like an anarchist. It was time to go home.

Mr. Morrisette greeted the cold and the need for down jackets as a returning soldier greets his mother's chicken soup and home-sewn quilts. He walked from room to room in their little house admiring the carpets, the bounce in their mattress, and the view of the house across the street. Mrs. Morrisette, quietly peeling, packed shorts, T-shirts, straw bag, bikini, and muumuu in a cedar box. She stored it under their bed next to boxes containing her bridal gown, her mother's tablecloths and Mr. Morrisette's love letters. She went back to grocery shopping, church duties and preparing three meals a day for Mr. Morrisette. On Mondays she did wash, on Tuesdays she dusted, and on Thursdays she vacuumed. Wednesday nights, they played gin rummy with the Delaneys.

Three weeks later, when their tans had turned as pasty as the February sky and Mrs. Morrisette had stopped scratching inside her bra, Mr. Morrisette began to rethink the vacation.

He cornered Reverend Chandler after Sunday services.

"St. Barts?" the reverend said. "No, I have never thought of visiting it."

"It's a French island, you know," Mr. Morrisette said.

"Quite sophisticated—David Letterman goes every winter."

The reverend raised his eyebrows.

The ladies at the library, where he volunteered from nine to noon Tuesday through Friday, giggled over his lectures on nonchalant nudity and its effect on moral laxity (he carefully left out Mrs. Morrisette's participation). Mrs. Buchanan, the head librarian, suggested he write an essay for *The Herald*. He toyed with headlines: "St. Barts, Rousseauian Paradise"

or perhaps a more populist angle: "Island's Titillations."

"Travel to exotic locations broadens one's outlook, wouldn't you agree?" he commented to a stranger checking out a book on Morocco. "Just last month, the wife and I . . . ."

The first 80-degree day in May, when he came home from the library, lunch wasn't on the kitchen table. He found his wife on the porch. Using broom handles and striped sheets, she had rigged a privacy spot on their little deck. She lay on a lounge chair, wearing the flowered bikini bottom.

"Not here, not at home, Emma," he pleaded. "What will people think?"

"No one needs to look," she answered.

Two weeks later, when he caught the O'Donnell boys sneaking around, he knew the word was out. The postman blushed when encountered, and Mrs. Morrisette admitted to being caught when the gasman came to check the meter. One morning at the library filing books in Fiction G-to-J, Mr. Morrisette overheard Darlene Delaney and Mrs. Buchanan in Fiction D-to-F.

" . . . indecent exposure . . . ." Darlene whispered.

" . . . moral laxity . . . ." Mrs. Buchanan replied.

He left the library early and drove to St. Matthew's.

Mrs. Morrisette wasn't pleased when he brought Reverend Chandler home, but at least she was dressed, which made it easier to talk in the kitchen while the reverend waited in the living room.

"How dare you?" she hissed, banging the coffee pot on the counter. "As if I were some Mary Magdalene."

"Talk with him, Emma," he begged.

Good manners prevailed. She carried the coffee to the living room. Mr. Morrisette, marooned in the kitchen, rearranged cleaning products. He straightened newspapers in the recycling bin and glued down a loose wallpaper edge. When he heard the reverend leave, he peeked out in time to

see their bedroom door slam.

For three days, he made his own breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but the sheets and brooms came off the deck and each day when he returned home, Mrs. Morrisette was placidly cleaning the house or cooking.

The following week, Mrs. Morrisette presented him with a DVD she had ordered through the mail. *Sex over Sixty*, the label read above a photo of a lean silver-haired couple prancing through a meadow.

“Where did you get it?” he asked. “I suppose you’re reading dirty magazines now.”

“*The Atlantic Monthly*,” Mrs. Morrisette replied.

He tried, but it wasn’t going anywhere. He turned out the lights and shrank to his side of the bed. Mrs. Morrisette sighed.

“You must stop, Emma,” he whispered. “There’s no telling where it will lead.”

“There you have it, don’t you, my dear? We’re in agreement on that,” she said.

In June, Mrs. Morrisette suddenly began to lose weight. Mr. Morrisette brought home chopped liver with carrot cake for dessert.

Early one Thursday in July, two young men drove up to the house in a red convertible and honked twice. Mrs. Morrisette, who had been fussing around the kitchen, said, “Oh, that’s for me. I’ll be home late, dear.”

Mr. Morrisette stared out the window. The driver was leaning against his car door, wearing tight blue shorts and a flowered shirt that revealed a weight-lifter’s chest. A blond ponytail hung down his back.

Mr. Morrisette trailed his wife into the front hall. When she took the straw bag out of the coat closet, Mr. Morrisette's stomach turned.

"Where did you find them, Emma?" he asked.

"At church," she said. "Samson—the blond one—does the flowers. There's no need to snort. That's what his mother named him."

"And where are Samson and his friend taking you?"

"The Cape."

"Any particular place on the Cape? I may need to send the police looking for you."

"Really, dear, they are lovely boys, perfectly harmless. Reverend Chandler has known Samson's family forever."

"Where, Emma?"

"If you must know, Truro Beach."

"The nudist beach! How can you . . . with these boys?"

"Not nudist, dear—naturalist. That's what you call them—us—these days. If you get hungry, dinner is in the refrigerator."

At the curb, Samson shook Mrs. Morrisette's plump hand. Leaning over to catch something she was saying, he laughed like a horse with his mouth wide open, his face turned up to the sun. Mr. Morrisette's cheeks flamed. While Samson put her bag and hat in the trunk, the other young man ushered Mrs. Morrisette into the backseat. She waved as they drove away.

Mr. Morrisette got the map and wrote directions for Truro Beach. He gunned his Chrysler and screeched out of the driveway. Two blocks before the turn onto the highway, he swerved into the library parking lot. When the tires came to rest, he laid his forehead against the steering wheel.

Later that morning, Mrs. Buchanan, the head librarian, asked him to stop talking to himself.

All summer Mrs. Morrisette lost weight. Dr. Martin, the young man who had taken over when Dr. Horne retired, stared at his

desk when he talked to them. He sent her downtown for more tests. Even Dr. Lipstein, the Harvard specialist, said it was too late. Treatment would only make matters worse.

“Let it run its course?” Mr. Morrisette protested. “She’s not the Charles River, for God’s sake.” Mrs. Morrisette led him through the pea green corridors to the parking lot where he backed into another car and curses flooded out of his mouth.

From then on, every Wednesday evening after gin rummy with the Delaneys, she loaded up her straw bag. Every Thursday morning, Samson, sometimes with a carload of young men, sometimes alone, pulled up in front of the house. Mrs. Morrisette put on her straw hat and walked to the curb where Samson held the car door open. As the weeks went by, Samson met her closer and closer to the front door, and Mrs. Morrisette leaned on his arm, resting partway down the sidewalk.

In September, Mr. Morrisette stopped going to the library, and they didn’t visit the Delaneys anymore. When Samson rang the doorbell, Mr. Morrisette led him to the bedroom, where Mrs. Morrisette sat, propped up in bed, wearing her muumuu and straw hat. Giving her a white-toothed smile, Samson lifted Mrs. Morrisette and carried her to his car.

One Thursday after they left, Mr. Morrisette drove past the library, onto the highway, and took the Truro Beach road. He found the convertible in a nearly empty parking lot. Slinking behind the dunes he followed a path to wooden stairs leading to the beach. At the top, he crouched and peered down the beach through binoculars. Mrs. Morrisette was lying flat, shaded by an umbrella, a pillow under her head. Samson, his long blond hair blowing loose, stretched beside her reading aloud from a magazine. They were both naked.

Mr. Morrisette’s knees ached and his arms grew tired holding the binoculars. Sweat seeped under his collar and dribbled down his back.

Samson put down the magazine. He picked up Mrs.

Morrisette in his arms and waded into the ocean. The water lapped at his calves, up to his thighs, then covered his buttocks and narrow waist. When it reached to where Mrs. Morrisette's shoulder rested against his chest, he walked through the water, parallel to the shore, past where Mr. Morrisette crouched at the top of the stairs. At last he emerged from the sea, water falling from his chiseled body, and he strode across the sand—he a Neptune, Mrs. Morrisette a waif in his arms. She clung to his chest, and through the binoculars, her breasts were indistinguishable from the loose folds that hung about her torso, its skin robbed of its lovely plumpness. Slowly she curled a feeble arm around the young man's neck. Samson bent his head and kissed her on the mouth.

Mr. Morrisette dropped the binoculars and ducked his head between his knees. Bit by bit, as he straightened up, his eyes traveled over his own spindly legs, lingered on his round belly, and settled on his narrow chest. He sprang to his feet and threw the binoculars as far as he could.

Everyone rose as the organ began to play.

The oak doors at the back of the church creaked open.

The congregation gasped.

Mr. Morrisette, standing by the aisle in the front pew, turned. Sun poured over the threshold. The entranceway filled with the pearl blue casket, borne high on the shoulders of six matching golden steeds.

Mr. Morrisette blinked.

No, not steeds, not horses—that was Samson at the left front and somehow he had come up with five sandy-maned friends, all his height. Their thick arms and broad shoulders rippled under gold jackets, their waists nipped in like girls', and sinewy thighs strained against fabric. Silk shirts opened to show six bronze chests glistening with golden chains.

No one in the church breathed.

Down the aisle, Mrs. Buchanan the librarian looked as though her head might pop.

As the young men advanced toward the altar, Samson's lips spread into the most beautiful shining smile Mr. Morrisette had ever seen. Mr. Morrisette looked into the sea of disapproving faces and returned Samson's smile with a grin so wholly inappropriate for a wife's funeral that the entire congregation sucked in its breath and wives clutched their husbands.

As the procession passed, Mr. Morrisette's fingers brushed the blue casket.

"Perfectly lovely," he whispered.

He reached for his wife's hand but found only air in the pew beside him.

"Dearly Beloved, . . ." Reverend Chandler began.

Henry Morrisette bowed his head and wept.