

Short story writer Marianne Strong once told *EQMM* that she usually draws the inspiration for her mysteries from two sources: Greek and Roman mythology, which is a lifelong love and the subject she teaches, and her hometown of WilkesBarre, Pennsylvania. This time out, however, she clearly called upon memories of the nursery rhymes nearly every child grows up with – and is often frightened by. Ms. Strong lives and teaches in Maryland.

Little Miss Muffet

by
Marianne Strong

For the fifth time that morning, six-year-old Jenny Derrick stood by the window of her bedroom, stared at the great white Victorian house next-door, and intoned the rhyme:

"Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider and sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away."

Her mother Carol shook her head, sighed, then ran downstairs to answer the doorbell.

It was Emma. "Good morning, Mrs. Derrick," the housemaid said, stepping inside and peering up the stairs to the second floor. "Jenny still confined to the upstairs?"

Carol nodded. "Yes, she is, Emma. At least, for the most part. The doctor says she can come down the stairs once or twice a day, but her lungs still need more time to strengthen."

Emma shrugged her large shoulders out of her woolly red jacket. "Damn asthma. Keeping that little girl up there for weeks. But I guess it's for her own good."

Carol cast an eye up the stairs. "I know. But when you bring her down today, Emma, keep her down as long as possible."

"I'll read her favourite book to her."

"No. Don't read the Mother Goose rhymes."

Emma lifted both eyebrows.

"Jenny's becoming obsessed with those rhymes," Carol said. "Today she told me that Little Miss Muffet lives in that damn house next-door and that early this morning a spider came to scare her."

Emma followed Carol to the kitchen, chuckling. "Mrs. Derrick, I know just how Jenny feels. You've got a human-size house here, but that big old place next-door looks like it could be full of spiders. You know, with those gauzy gray curtains on the big windows, that rickety porch, and that thing on the roof. What do you call it?"

"A cupola," Carol said. "I should have moved

out of this old neighborhood when my ex left us." She gulped the last of her coffee and stuffed papers into her briefcase. "In the future, I'll require any client interested in buying a Victorian house to take a psychiatric test." She grimaced. "I should have taken one when I agreed to move here."

Emma dropped a third sugar cube into her own coffee. "Show your clients those nice new condos down by the harbor. I understand they got hot tubs the size of a flatbed."

"Sounds great to me," Carol said. "But half of Baltimore is obsessed with the nineteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe and all that. Even named their football team the Ravens. Sometimes I think this city's haunted by Poe and his child bride. Only fourteen, she was. And living with that man and his mother. What a family."

Emma patted Carol's shoulder. "Easy does it, Mrs. Derrick. Jenny's reading Mother Goose, not Poe."

"Mother Goose no doubt inspired Poe," Carol said, snapping shut her briefcase. "Blind mice getting their tails cut off; blackbirds baked in a pie; spiders scaring little girls."

"Well," Emma said, "any spidery-looking people live next-door?"

"No," Carol said. "Mrs. Welling's daughter Joan looks more like a mouse than a spider."

"What's the mother look like?"

Carol stopped digging in her purse for her car keys and looked at Emma.

"You know, Emma, she does look like an elderly Miss Muffet might look: curly blue-grey hair and flowered dresses with little lace collars."

"Well then, there you are," Emma said. "Maybe Jenny just did see something. Anybody at all in the neighborhood look like a spider?"

"Come to think of it, my ex always thought that Mrs. Welling's stepdaughter looked like a spider." Carol glanced up the stairs again. "Do

you suppose . . ." She stopped.

"Why don't we just ask Mrs. Welling if her stepdaughter came to visit?"

Carol frowned. "I haven't seen Mrs. Welling out for a few weeks. I assume she's sick." She lifted a hand, then dropped it. "I've felt a little bad not checking on her, but she has her daughter, and with Jenny sick and her father too damn busy to visit . . ." Carol shrugged.

"Hmm," Emma mumbled. "The mother's sick, eh? I wonder if the daughter needs some help."

Carol shuddered. "Oh God, Emma. The neighbors all say she has plenty of money to hire help, but you wouldn't leave me now, would you?"

"No, no," Emma reassured her employer. "I don't fancy cleaning hundred-year-old dust off all that curlicue Victorian furniture. Besides, I couldn't leave Jenny."

Carol said a silent prayer of thanks to whatever saint was in charge of harried single mothers. "Bless you," she said aloud. "As a matter of fact, Emma, I was going to ask if you could sit Jenny for a few hours Saturday if my clients and I need to meet with the mortgage people."

"Sure," Emma said. "My son doesn't have little Bobby this weekend and those marriage countering groups are meeting in the church auditorium on Saturday. So no bingo." Emma squinted. "Or is it marriage encounter groups?"

"Counter, encounter. Depends, I guess." Carol glanced at the hall clock. "I'd better get a move on."

A lilting child's voice floated down the stairs:

"Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet

Eating her curds and whey;

Along came a spider, a spider, a spider..."

Carol shook her head. "Emma, I'm really worried about Jenny. I hope the fever hasn't affected her mind. The doctor told me it wouldn't, but . . ." She cut off that thought and glanced at her watch. She had fifteen minutes to meet her clients at the Stevenson house. She had to make this sale. With Paul's child-support payments none too steady, money was tight. She threw her jacket over her shoulders.

Emma followed her to the front door. "Jenny's just got a good imagination. Children do, bless them. Little Bobby swears there's a grizzly bear in my kitchen." Emma flexed her muscles. "Probably means me, the little stinker."

"Just the same," Carol said, "call me if you . . . well, if you notice anything that alarms you about Jenny's behavior."

"I will," Emma promised.

Outside, Carol stood for a moment, looking at the Victorian house. She'd bring back a nice story for Jenny to take her mind off it. Maybe "Snow White." No, she said to herself, thinking of the poison apple. Maybe "Cinderella." No, again. No wicked stepmothers. Why were children's books and rhymes so scary?

In her car, Carol turned on the radio, then looked again at the graying Victorian. With a coat of white paint, clean lace curtains, and some wreaths and candles, it could grace a Christmas card. Intimations of happy families. As long as you couldn't see inside.

By noon, Carol managed to get her clients to make an offer. She left the office calculating how many hours she could devote to nailing down the deal without neglecting Jenny. She grimaced. The single mother's ever-present balancing act. Driving home down Loch Raven Road, past the imposing doors of the stone mansions built by the steel and shipping magnates of Baltimore's heyday as an industrial port city, she wondered if maybe the Victorians with their mores against divorce had actually dealt more selflessly with the needs of children. "Damn Paul," she muttered.

In the driveway, she cut off the motor and rolled her head around to loosen her neck muscles.

When she entered the house, she could hear Emma in the kitchen, humming. She took a deep breath, savoured the rich buttery smell, and thanked God for Emma. A roasted turkey, she thought. Enough food for four or five days. Emma was worth a thousand Pauls.

"That you, Mrs. Derrick?" Emma called from the kitchen.

"It is." Carol hung up her coat and walked into the kitchen. Emma, clad in an apron that said "I cook it my way," was cutting up some mushrooms for a salad.

"How was Jenny today?" Carol asked.

"Just fine. She came downstairs twice and we read a few pages of *The Little Mermaid*. Then I took her upstairs again and let her sleep. When I heard her walking about, I went back up." Emma glanced at Carol. "She was reading her Mother Goose book."

"Not 'Little Miss Muffet' again."

"No, she's gone on to another rhyme."

Carol dropped down into a chair. "Oh God, Emma, that's wonderful."

Emma wiped her hands on her apron and sat next to Carol. "But you know, Mrs. Derrick, Jenny and your ex were right about the spider."

"You mean Mrs. Welling's stepdaughter?"

Pauline? You saw her?"

"Well, I don't know who the woman was. But I saw a woman come out of the house next-door, and I'll be darned if she didn't look like a spider. A big spider. She had on a black suit and a red scarf. Looked like a black-widow spider, I swear. To top it all off, she had curly salt-and-pepper hair. Made her look like a spider carrying its nest along." Emma shuddered. "I wouldn't want no run-ins with that woman." She pulled over the salad bowl and plopped in a handful of mushrooms. "'Less, of course, there was no way to avoid it."

Carol laughed. It felt good. "Emma, if the spider stepdaughter made you angry enough, you'd be down on her like an angry wasp. And you'd win."

"Likely I would," Emma said, flexing her broad shoulders. "But I prefer going round spiders if I can. Anyway, if that was the stepdaughter, she's enough to frighten any Miss Muffet. Know anything about her?"

Carol pulled off her shoes, flexed her toes, and stretched out her arms. "Not much. Pauline and her husband don't come to the house very much. I've seen them at the Globe Bank. They both work there. She's the head teller. Neighbors say that she came to live with Mrs. Welling when she was about fifteen, when Mrs. Welling married her second husband. That was long before Paul and I moved in."

"For a bank teller," Emma said, "the woman drives a mighty nice car. One of those fancy ones. Lexup or Lexal or something. Maybe I ought to think about being a teller."

"Lexus." Carol frowned. "Tellers don't make that much money."

"Well then, so much for that idea," Emma said, tossing the salad vigorously. "I'm better with kids and food than money anyway." She turned toward Carol. "Didn't you say the mama had money? Maybe she bought the car."

"I doubt she parted with any money, at least not voluntarily. She doesn't spend very much. She hasn't air-conditioned the house or fixed the roof or done much of anything else."

"Could be the spider's husband has money," Emma suggested. "He own the bank?"

"No, Edward's an accountant or something. I'm not sure."

A tapping sound began, and Carol looked up at the ceiling. "Jenny's up and playing. I should go up to her."

"You go up," Emma said. "I'll finish making the salad, slice up some turkey for you, and call when it's ready. You can eat and then take Jenny some supper."

Carol threw Emma a kiss. "Emma, will you marry me?"

"Just go up to Jenny," Emma said, laughing.

Outside Jenny's room, Carol paused and listened to her daughter's high sweet voice:

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to fight a battle,
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle.
Just then flew by a monstrous crow,
As black as a tar-barrel,
Which frightened both the heroes so,
They quite forgot their quarrel."

After a moment's silence, Jenny began again.

Carol entered the room. "I'm home, darling," she said, and braced as Jenny dashed to her, arms out. They basked for a moment in each other's hugs and kisses.

"Did you sell your house today, Mommy?" Jenny asked.

"Yes," Carol said, "and that means we can get your new bike soon. The doctor says you'll be ready to go out and ride in no time."

Jenny turned and looked out the window at the white house next-door, then turned her grave grey eyes, uncannily adult, on Carol. "I don't want to ride outside," she said.

"Why ever not?" Carol asked, glancing at the Mother Goose book lying on Jenny's bed. "You aren't afraid to see a spider, are you?"

"Oh no," Jenny said. "The spider is gone. The crow chased the spider away."

Carol reached for her daughter's hands and held them firmly. "Jenny, you know that the spider and the crow are just part of the rhymes. They aren't real."

"I'm hungry," Jenny said. "Can I come down for supper, please?"

"I'm afraid you shouldn't, honey. But I'll bring your supper up right away, and then we can talk some more, okay?"

Jenny nodded.

Carol turned to leave, and, at the door, turned again to watch Jenny move to the window.

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee," Jenny intoned, "agreed to fight a battle."

Carol frowned, wondering if she should question Jenny. She hated to encourage the child's fascination with the house next-door lest she make matters worse. Anyway, perhaps Jenny had simply withdrawn into fantasy as a way of dealing with the anger she had witnessed between her parents before her father's departure. Carol decided to get through the weekend and the house sale and then move

Jenny into another room. For tonight, she'd have Jenny sleep with her.

Downstairs, she said a reluctant goodbye to Emma, ate her own supper quickly, readied Jenny's, and went back upstairs to her daughter. While Jenny ate, Carol watched the house next-door. Through two large windows, she could see part of Mrs. Welling's bedroom. In the dim light glowing through the gauzy curtains, she could just see a lumpy form beneath a quilt. Mrs. Welling, Carol supposed, asleep. Through a large window to the right, Carol could see the second-floor landing. A ceiling light glowed there. She reached up and pulled down the shade on Jenny's window.

By nine, Jenny was asleep in Carol's room. Downstairs, Carol sat at a desk with real-estate papers, a calculator, pencils, and erasers. The house settled into a peaceful quiet.

At midnight, figures blurred before Carol's eyes, and she realized that she'd do better in the morning. She packed up her papers, started upstairs, then remembered that she had to take out the garbage, usually Paul's job.

Outside, she placed the plastic bag on the curb, then turned and looked at the Victorian house. From where she stood, she could see two lights burning: one she'd seen from Jenny's room. Another seemed to drift foglike from a front window. A spider and a crow, Carol thought. Had Jenny indeed seen something? Joan and Pauline arguing? Pauline and Mrs. Welling? The stepsisters? The stepmother and stepdaughter? The Grimms' fairy tales said evil festered in such relationships.

Carol shook herself. She needed a good dose of reality therapy. She went back into her own house without looking again at the house next-door.

But, even with Jenny cuddled warmly beside her, she slept fitfully that night, dreaming of a crow flying about with spiders on its back.

At seven-thirty she awoke, troubled, from a dream that she was running down a long corridor, pursuing a spider carrying Jenny. The spider looked like Paul. She turned her head to see if Jenny was still sleeping.

She was alone in the bed. "Jenny," she called, tugging at the blanket that was wrapped around her legs. "Jenny?" She broke free and ran into Jenny's room.

Jenny had raised the shade on her window. She stood watching the house and reciting another rhyme:

"Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.

The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock."

She was shaking.

"Jenny," Carol said, rushing to her daughter. Holding Jenny close, she looked out the window into the Victorian house. She could see no one on the landing, but she could hear banging and muffled yells.

Jenny recited the rhyme again.

"Jenny," Carol said, trying to keep her voice calm. "What did you see?"

Jenny stopped reciting. She clung to Carol.

"Tell me, Jenny," Carol said.

"He chased her up the stairs," Jenny said, her voice muffled against Carol.

"Who chased whom up the stairs, Jenny? Mrs. Welling? Old Mrs. Welling? Did somebody chase her?"

Jenny shook her head. "The mouse ran up the stairs."

Carol held Jenny's face between her hands. "Jenny, the mouse is only in a rhyme."

"But you said she was a mouse. Yesterday, I heard you tell Emma."

"Oh," Carol said. "Joan."

"He chased her up the stairs."

Carol shook her head. "Someone chased Joan?"

"A man. But she's locked in her room now and she's gone. They're all gone."

Carol looked out the window again. She could see no one in the house and no car in the driveway. But she could still hear muffled cries. "Who is locked in her room, Jenny?"

"Mrs. Welling. She's locked in her room because he fell down and broke his crown. Mommy, she threw him down. I saw."

Jenny broke free of her mother and turned to the window. In a high voice, she recited:

"Goosey, goosey, gander, whither shall I wander?

Upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber.

There I met an old man who would not say his prayers.

I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs."

She turned to Carol. "She threw him down. Then the mouse ran down the stairs. The mouse is gone."

For a moment, Carol wanted only to pull down the shade, to lock the doors, and to pretend that the family and the house next-door did not

exist. She heard another cry and decided. "Jenny," she said, "if I go over to help Mrs. Welling, will you stay here alone for just a few minutes? I'll be right back."

Jenny gripped her mother's arm. "Don't go over there, Mommy. The crow will get you."

"Jenny, I'm going to call for some help to come, but I must go over to Mrs. Welling. Then I'll come right back. I have to go now, Jenny. Just stay here. Don't leave the room."

Carol put Jenny in a chair, ran downstairs, called the police, and asked that help be sent to 447 Clemm Road. She gave her own address: 449. She grabbed a raincoat, struggling to get it over her nightgown. Just as she left, she heard Jenny again: "Goosey, goosey ..."

As she dashed across the front lawn, Carol tried to make sense of Jenny's rhymes. Joan and someone had argued. The man must(have been Pauline's husband. He was the only man Carol had ever seen at the house. Perhaps Joan had pushed him, or whoever the man was, down the stairs. Then, Joan had locked her mother in her room and left. Jenny said they had all left. Madness, Carol thought. Dangerous madness, but she could not simply sit by and not even try to help a woman who was lonely and perhaps ill. Besides, if Joan had just left, as Jenny said, then she wouldn't return for at least a few minutes.

She half expected to be locked out, but the door to the Victorian house opened with her thrust. She looked back, saw no car coming up the street. If she could get Mrs. Welling out and over to her house before Pauline or Joan or the man came back, the police could handle it from there.

She entered the house, headed for the stairs, then stopped abruptly. "God," she gasped. A body lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs. Carol recognized Pauline's husband. From a gash in his head, blood had seeped out, soaking darkly into the green rug. Carol looked about frantically for a phone to call an ambulance, then remembered that she had to get herself and Mrs. Welling out of the house as soon as possible.

The banging she had heard earlier began again, accompanied by the cries for help.

She ran up the stairs and to the door from which the cries and knocks were still coming.

"Mrs. Welling," she called out, "I'll help you." She turned the key that sat in the lock and pushed open the door.

From a backdrop of blue flowered wallpaper, Mrs. Welling stared at Carol.

"Mrs. Welling, I've called the police. Come with me to my house."

Mrs. Welling stood frozen.

"You'll be safe until the police come," Carol urged her, wondering if she could take Mrs. Welling out a back door and avoid the body.

"Is she gone?"

Carol nodded.

"Is he dead?"

"I think so," Carol said, relieved that Mrs. Welling already knew. "But you must..." Only then did Carol see the lamp on the floor just to the left of the door. Blood smeared the base. Carol stared into Mrs. Welling's light blue eyes. "My God," she said.

Mrs. Welling looked at the lamp, her eyes wide. "He caused all of it," she said, pointing a long, thin finger toward the stairs. "He told Pauline to take my money and my certificates. And Pauline did it. She threatened me and I had to hide in my room."

"My God," Carol mumbled. Little Miss Muffet and the spider, she thought. "Why didn't you tell the police?" she said aloud.

Mrs. Welling threw her hands up. "I was very stupid. I told Joan. Then she wanted money, too." Her gray head shook, but whether from anger or fear Carol could not tell. "My own daughter. She was as greedy as Pauline. The ungrateful child. They quarreled. Joan and Pauline. Joan said she would tell the police if they didn't give her some of the money."

Carol caught her breath. "Yesterday? Did your daughters quarrel yesterday?"

Mrs. Welling nodded. "I was very angry then. I had to shout at them. I told them I would call the police if they didn't stop."

"Then," Carol said, "you are the . . ." She's the crow, Carol thought, the crow who stopped the battle of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. "You stopped them?"

Mrs. Welling rubbed her right hand, pushing the flaccid skin back and forth. "Last night, I told them that I would call the police if they did not bring back my certificates. All of them. But then he came today." She stopped rubbing her hand and glared at Carol. "Fine thieves they all are. Can't even stick together. He didn't want to share the money. And he struck Joan."

The mouse, Carol thought, ran up the clock. "Did he chase her up the stairs?"

Mrs. Welling nodded.

Carol swallowed. "Then it was Joan who..." Carol turned and looked at the body at the foot of the stairs. She had to get herself and Mrs. Welling out before Joan returned. "Mrs. Welling," she said. "Where is your daughter now?"

Mrs. Welling plucked at the pink-flowered sleeve on her right arm. "She went to get

Pauline. At the bank. She took their car and went."

"We must leave, Mrs. Welling," Carol said.

Mrs. Welling stood immobile.

Carol pulled her by the arm, then pushed gently from behind. As they reached the door, she felt Mrs. Welling jump. The front door had opened.

Too late, Carol realized. She stared down at Joan and Pauline. "Christ," Pauline said, slamming the door.

"Oh, my God!" Joan said. "What's she doing here?" Mrs. Welling backed up into Carol.

"Never mind that," Pauline said. From the bottom of the stairs, she looked up at Carol and Mrs. Welling. "I suppose Mother's told you everything."

Carol moved protectively in front of Mrs. Welling and swallowed. "No, she's told me nothing."

"Cut the crap," Pauline said. "For days, she's been threatening to tell somebody." She turned to Joan. "We'll have to get rid of the two of them."

"How?" Joan sputtered. "How do we get rid of three bodies?"

"We put them in the cellar. All we need is time to get out of the country. Nobody will miss Mother or Edward. The sap. I told him to stay away from here. Well, now Mother's conveniently gotten rid of him for us."

Carol's mouth fell open. She looked from Joan to Mrs. Welling and back. "Then it wasn't you."

Joan raised shaking hands to her face. "She did it. She hit him with the lamp. He wanted all the money. All of it. He hit me. So Mother ... "

"Shut up," Pauline said, grabbing Joan's arm. "We take the money, split it, and be rid of each other. If you're as smart as you are greedy, you'll disappear in Europe somewhere."

"But what about her?" Joan said, gesturing up toward Carol. "Somebody will miss her."

"Not in time to matter to us. Her husband's gone. The kid's the only one there and she won't know anything."

Pauline started up the stairs.

Carol and Mrs. Welling backed into the bedroom.

From behind Carol, Mrs. Welling grunted. "The lamp," she said.

Carol looked down at the lamp. In a flash, she bent down, picked it up, and, from the bedroom doorway, flung it at Pauline.

It hit Pauline in the right knee. She crumpled and fell back into Joan just as the front door burst open.

"There's Mommy," Jenny yelled.

Two policemen pushed in, looked at the body, at Carol, at Mrs. Welling, at Pauline and Joan, and then at each other. "What the hell?" one of them said.

"Goosey, goosey," Jenny mumbled, pointing at Mrs. Welling. "She threw him down the stairs." Jenny stared at the body.

"Jenny," Carol yelled. She ran down the stairs, clambering over Pauline and pushing Joan against the railing. She clasped Jenny and looked up at the police. "I'm getting her out of here. You can ask this monstrous family what happened here. I'll be next-door."

She picked Jenny up and walked out. From her own porch, she stole a look at the Victorian. Mother Goose rhymes about cutting off the tails of mice and throwing people down the stairs; Grimms' fairy tales about wicked stepmothers and stepdaughters. They knew more about families nursing greed, anger, and hatred than all the psychologists put together.

Carol set Jenny down. "We're going to get a new house, Jenny, and a new life," she said. "And we're taking Emma with us."

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