

## Red Widow

Maria was a novice when it came to service stations. Never had she been able to top up her car's tank without spilling a little fuel over her hands. Even after seven or eight attempts, it was always the first spurt out of the nozzle that caught her. It could have been dangerous had she been a smoker like her husband.

Jimmy had always performed this duty throughout their forty-year marriage, leaving Maria to remain in the car, directing her to keep her head down until he returned. She remembered only too well what the price would be if she made eye contact with any other men nearby. None of this mattered anymore - not since Jimmy's accident. Now Maria could cast her eyes where she wanted, talk to whom she pleased and spill as much petrol over herself as she liked.

On this night, Maria's hands and shoes were dripping with fuel, as the old woman had been unable to control her trembling whilst filling the jerry can. The smell of the petroleum was stronger than Maria had ever experienced before, and she closed her eyes and began slowly and deeply inhaling the fumes through her nose. Maria's fear was then quickly swept aside by a sudden hot rush, with the sensation strangely arousing her.

Maria could not recall entering the store and paying. She was certain there was no sexual encounter between herself and the man behind the counter, despite Jimmy's paranoid delusions of the past remaining at the forefront of her conscience. Those scars never healed and most likely never will.

Jimmy would always confront her with deranged accusations of unfaithfulness; dalliances with men she had only seen for a fleeting moment through a window, or with a stranger who simply happened to look her way whilst walking by. Maria had admitted to all of them in those moments, if only to spare herself further punishment from her husband's belt.

Maria was uncertain as to how long she had been standing outside her living room, nor could she remember arriving home. Jimmy was still seated where she left him, with the back of his head contrasting against the blue glow of the television screen. The shine of his baldness reflected back to Maria with every subtle movement he made, and she continued watching from the doorway, unsure whether or not her husband could feel her presence.

For years it had been wonderful. The fond memories shared of the church group they had built together; an institution that had become synonymous with the couple. Jimmy, the self-anointed reverend and she the matriarchal figure by his side. 'The Glory Baptist Ministries' had become their lives, more so after their adult children moved overseas to pursue their own dreams.

But somewhere along the journey it all turned horribly sour. The man Maria had loved all her life had become something else. Then everything changed forever on the night of the accident.

For a moment, Maria thought she caught the slightest twitch of her husband's jaw, before realising it was the lights from the television shimmering upon the side of his face. This would have been impossible anyway, for Jimmy's movements were now limited to the only working nerves and muscles he had left. Everything below his neck had been rendered useless - ever since the accident.

Maria brought her hands up to her face and quietly sniffed the strong residual smell of the petrol that still lingered. It was likely that her invalid husband perceived the aroma drifting in from somewhere behind him, but his broken, wheelchair-bound body would not be able to turn around and see. Once having picked up the scent, somewhere in his twisted mind he might begin to feel the fear. Maria prayed this was so.

These were to be the last minutes of Reverend Jimmy Felipe's sick and perverted life. One filled with sordid secrets that only Maria knew, and was barely able to hide it from her children and their hundreds of followers at the church. Years of suffering through the lies, the beatings and the rapes had brought her to this moment.

Maria took another deep breath and looked at the man she had come to hate. Soon the entire truth about Jimmy would be revealed and those dearest to her would at last learn of her ordeal. These would be revelations that would justify her actions.

The woman did not take her eyes off her husband as she carried the heavy container toward where he was seated. Jimmy did not utter a word, not even after the loud thudding of the fuel can on the floor right behind him. The thought of walking around the bulk of the motorised chair to look into his eyes one final time did occur to Maria, for they were eyes that she once loved so truly and deeply. If she stared into them again, would she relent and offer her husband a stay of execution?

Maria would take no chances and remained where she stood, for there was no turning back now. Those same eyes belonged to her tormentor; her torturer; her abuser – and this would be the man she remembered.

She never understood why. Not until after the accident.

When Maria looked back now, she could see the signs were there - the subtle changes in her husband's behaviour, with his resentment toward her being innocuous at first. She

remembered him pulling his hand away whenever she held hers out for him to take, but only in private and away from his adoring congregation. Of all the thoughts running through Maria's mind at this time, strangely this was the one that first rose to the surface.

Reaching down behind where Jimmy sat motionless, Maria picked up the container as quietly as she could. The thought of pouring the contents all over her unsuspecting husband did occur to her, but that would be too easy. Tonight, he would dance with his own demise, watching helplessly as the many tools of his abuse perish before the circle of death closed in on him.

There was not an item of furniture inside their home that Maria was not savagely thrown across and abused. When it first started, Jimmy would thrust himself upon her without warning, his own length becoming a weapon as it brutalised her orifices. The attacks became more ferocious as the months went by, with the good reverend often improvising with kitchen implements and other household items of all shapes and sizes. Often beaten within an inch of being rendered unconscious, Maria would never know when she regained her senses what foreign objects may have been inside her.

She did not suspect her husband's double life until her first diagnosis of gonorrhoea a year ago. Her contracting the disease coincided with a sharp increase in sexual encounters forced upon her by Jimmy, who evidently had picked up the condition elsewhere. None of their friends or members of the church were even remotely aware, with the possible exception of the young men and choirboys being entertained by the reverend in private after every service.

Maria recalled the evil smirk on her husband's face when the pathology reports came back positive, all but confirming he had passed it onto her deliberately. Jimmy's look of

satisfaction at the time would be similar to the expression Maria was wearing now as she poured the petrol behind his wheelchair.

Reflecting eerily as the light from the television screen danced upon the surface of the puddle, the liquid flowed wonderfully around the wheels and all the way to the nearest wall. The smell of gasoline overpowered the room, yet the man whose life was about to end did not even twitch nor utter the slightest sound.

Maria expected the monster to at least appear to beg for his life, but was not entirely surprised by his silence. But this was an existence unworthy of saving, for the accident had destroyed everything and Jimmy had taken her down with him.

Their church was already gone, with the congregation ostracising them in disgust, and never forgiving the reverend's betrayal. Jimmy had stolen their trust as well as large sums of their money, with all this being discovered when the new custodians of the church first inspected the books. The weddings, christenings and engagements he had officiated over now meant nothing to the community. The dishonest nature of Jimmy Felipe devastated everyone who allowed him to play an important role in their lives.

Maria could only imagine their reaction if they learned what the money was used for.

The official reports kept from the general public concluded the reverend's injuries were the result of 'an unorthodox sexual act'. The wording on the police and medical documents described exactly how it was; a simple four-word phrase that had torn Maria's life apart. The act in question involved a hotel balcony and a male escort, paid with funds misappropriated from church donations.

Jimmy's deviancy had progressed significantly to the point where he requested the prostitute to suspend him upside down from a great height during anal sex. The fall was from the fourth landing, which was a drop of around twenty metres, with both men fortunate not to

be killed instantly. The seventeen-year-old rent boy suffered only a broken collarbone, having toppled over the railing with the older man his penis was attached to. Their screams caught the attention of the other hotel guests and the sight of the two naked men laying in the garden prompted emergency services to be called immediately.

Had Jimmy booked a room one level lower then perhaps he might have been able to limp away from the scene. He always was a smooth-talker and possibly could have explained why he was locked out of his hotel room without his clothes, assuming there was a good explanation for booking accommodation in the first place. The church might have been saved and his embezzling of community donations covered up.

But it was not to be. Witnesses, and there were dozens – some even vaguely recognising the reverend, all reported what they had seen to the authorities. Photos of the broken old man lying on the ground were captured on phones and the local news had arrived in time to film the gurney as it was loaded onto the ambulance.

Maria remembered the phone call she received that night, but the initial numbness she experienced after being told her husband was in critical condition at the hospital quickly passed. She knew whenever he was out late that he was with younger men, and that Jimmy's insatiable appetite for sex would result in her violent rape moments after he returned home. The phone call had changed all that – and now he would never lay a hand on her again.

Maria was trying her best not to smile whilst playing the role of the shattered wife when she arrived at the hospital. There she saw her husband for the first time laying paralysed on the bed, connected to all kinds of equipment and breathing through a ventilator. Immediately she began to cry, but not for the man clinging onto life before her eyes.

Jimmy was not expected to survive that first night, nor the second or third. There was no improvement in his condition but he was still alive. Maria thought back to that first week

in the hospital, where she waited anxiously for the authorities to ask her if she wished to unplug his machine and let him go. At the time, the whisperings of the doctors in her presence suggested that offer may present itself sooner rather than later. When it did, she hoped they would give her the honour of hitting the switches herself.

On the fifth day, as if touched by the hand of God himself, Jimmy regained consciousness.

Maria could never understand why a higher power would allow a man such as Jimmy Felipe to live; giving a second chance to a man who had committed fiendish acts whilst masquerading as a conduit for the words of Christ. This was a self-styled charlatan who had befriended and gained the trust of so many of the Lord's followers, only to steal from them in order to pay for his homosexual urges.

When the ventilator was removed from her husband's windpipe, all but confirming his survival, Maria's lifelong commitment to her faith ended. Not caring about God's judgment any longer proved to be quite a liberating experience for a woman now in control of her own destiny.

Maria once more found herself in her living room staring mindlessly at the top of her husband's head. She had allowed her thoughts to momentarily remove herself from the task at hand, needing to do so in order to strengthen her resolve. Thinking back upon her suffering was the guiding hand she needed to be able to end this evil man's life. Remembering where she left off, Maria hurriedly poured the remains of the petrol container around the walls and doors.

Again, the thought had entered Maria's mind to save a little in the can for the villain himself. She could stand in front of him whilst dousing him in the accelerant, performing what would be a gratifying *coup de gras*. Alas, that would be too easy, she convinced herself

once more. Maria wanted this man to suffer; to feel the heat and the rage closing in all around him. She could only hope that his final thoughts were of the terrible sins he had committed, which became the catalyst for the fiery reckoning he had brought upon himself.

The stage was now set and Maria took a few more deep breaths, for what was to happen next would be the true test of her fortitude. The clarity that she now experienced brought her attention to the television that had been running the entire time. What had been a mindless jumble of colours and brightness to her, now appeared sharp and focussed. The faces on the large screen struck a sudden familiarity to her, belonging to those who had entertained her and Jimmy every night at the same timeslot for many years.

Maria had been seeking something extra to make her husband's execution all the more worthwhile. Taking the remote control from the coffee table, she turned the volume up as high as it would go. In doing so, she was at last rewarded with Jimmy now groaning and hollering incoherently. Was there a spark somewhere in his inactive brain that knew he was about to die? Was this a pathetic attempt to alter his fate? Maria certainly hoped so, even if it was at the same level of existence as a caterpillar looking up to see a shoe coming down upon it.

Jimmy's cognitive powers never did return to him, nor were they going to. The accident of three months ago bringing with it a major stroke, leaving him unable to communicate. This was a vegetable who should have been put down, not left in the care of the person he ruthlessly tortured when he was of able mind and body.

With the sound of the sermon from the television evangelists bouncing loudly around the walls, Maria walked out of the room. There would be one final part of the ceremony she needed to perform; to make everything come together.



Maria spent the next hour in front of her vanity mirror applying her make-up. Tonight, she would be a lady once more, allowing herself the pleasure of being pampered one last time. She did not see the grey-haired, wrinkled old woman in the mirror, for instead the reflection was that of herself all those years ago on her wedding day; the moment in every girl's life when her beauty would be unrivalled.

The red dress Maria chose fitted her well, and the mirror highlighted curves and bumps that would make any man want her. This was how she wanted to appear when it was all over. She had decided this weeks ago, when her husband's discharge from hospital was confirmed. All her planning had reached a crescendo and now all that was required was the strength to flick the lighter into life.

Maria was amazed at how quickly the flames ran around the edges of the room, with the sudden burst of heat being a lot stronger than she anticipated. She had hoped to stand in the doorway and watch her husband and his chair become engulfed in the inferno, with the equipment perhaps even exploding as an added treat. But with the temperature becoming unbearable, Maria had little choice but to turn and walk away.

The television cut off as she took a final look over her shoulder, as the entire room was now a bright orange blast of light. Needing to shield her eyes from the powerful glow, she could now see the flames dancing around where Jimmy was seated. He would perish in a matter of seconds, had he not already died from fright.

The police and fire brigade had never encountered such a bizarre scene as the one that greeted them when they arrived. Maria Felipe was waiting for them, dressed as though she was attending a ball, without a care in the world whilst her house was ablaze in the background. Her face was ridiculously over applied with white and red makeup, which was smeared and streaked heavily. The woman looked no different to a small girl who had gone

through her mother's lipstick and rouge for the first time and had applied it messily to her young face. Ignoring all the questions from the emergency crews, Maria simply stared ahead into nothingness whilst grinning maniacally.

Before she was led away, news teams at the location captured photos and video footage of the woman in red surrounded by police. These images were plastered across every newspaper and featured prominently on morning news programs, once the charred remains of Jimmy Felipe were discovered and made public.

Maria's infamy was established the very next day, when the only possible suspect in the case was formally charged. Her flamboyant appearance that made headlines across the city earned her the nickname that would follow her throughout her trial and sentencing.

Maria Felipe was once her name in a former life.

Now she would be forever known as The Red Widow.

THE END