

## **A Simple Thing**

by Janice Mayo

The night was glacial, record setting. The city prostrated itself in muffled silence, afraid in moving it might shatter itself into icy fragments, reflecting back the starlight shining down through thin, clear air. Deep cold always wiped away the smog, Maeve O'Sullivan thought. She stamped her boot clad feet on the brownstones' tar roof, pulling the woolen coat tighter against her slight frame. It was too cold to be outside for someone her age, or any living creature for that matter, but she had to see the stars one more time before closing her eyes.

With reluctance, she had left the apartment earlier that day, in late morning, to buy food to tide her over until the cold spell let up. What would be considered warmer? Ten degrees would be a good start, she guessed. She wouldn't have gone out at all except the pantry was almost empty and she was completely out of tea, which in her heart, was akin to sacrilege.

Rounding the corner, she came to halt not expecting to see him there, bracing himself against the bitter cold, his navy pea coat buttoned to the chin. Her heart skipped a beat then, ceasing its daily grind before grudgingly shuddering back to life – the feeling of it made her breathless. His sandy colored hair and hazel eyes strongly mimicked her husband's when he was alive. She estimated the young man was in his mid-twenties, clean cut. He moved along the sidewalk, stopping and admiring each store's festive holiday display before going to the next. She couldn't help but follow him even though

the cold had penetrated the thick rubber soles of her boots making her bunions ache.

Social workers at the senior center classified her as the *old-old*, people over the age of seventy-five – but she was even older. With the way her feet were complaining, maybe the caseworkers should create a new category called the *old-old-old*, she thought, wiggling her toes to stop the incessant tingling.

The young man's face was flushed from the chill. Skin she was sure flushed just as red after love-making. She embarrassed herself thinking of him like that, but it didn't stop her insides from stirring, a physical reaction she had believed long dead. Self-conscious, she looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Why did she think everyone could read her mind? She always thought those around her were privy to her deepest thoughts, could see right into her somehow. Knowing this was not the case, even on a logical level, didn't ease her Catholic-guilt.

Her and Sam had been quite young when they married, knew little about each other. He was walking into an instant family since she already had a daughter, Molly, but it didn't seem to bother him like it did other men. She remembered feeling light-headed at the church, the altar's platform moving under her feet, shifting ever so slightly, making everything seem off-kilter. Later, she received a photo of Sam through the mail. It showed him being pulled back into the church by his best man as he strained to get away before the ceremony began. Both men had huge grins on their faces. Seeing the photo

made things equal between them – knowing she wasn't the only one nervous that day.

She proceeded to follow the sandy haired Sam-stranger. When he went into a department store, she stopped and waited by the scuffed metal and glass revolving door to see if he would come back out, wanting to see him just one more time, wanting to verify to herself that she wasn't having old-age imaginings. For just a moment, she had trouble distinguishing past from present, but then she remembered Sam was gone – had been gone a long time now. This shifting of time upset her, made her brain hurt. She took a deep breath, stiffened her back and marched in the direction of home, forgetting the grocers, the tea, all the while ignoring her yelping feet.

Right then, she decided it was time.

Now on the rooftop, in the dark, her breath coming out in frosty plumes, looking up at the stars, she regretted not stopping to buy the tea. A bad choice on her part. Leaving the roof and descending to her apartment, she stopped in the foyer to hang her coat before removing the heavy winter boots. She rubbed the bottoms of her feet on the thick piled carpet to get the blood flowing again.

In the bedroom, she studied the photos of their life together. The first was at the beach in front of a lopsided sand castle Molly and he had built together – that had been a good day, she remembered. Another one was of the three of them in front of the Christmas tree with goofy smiles on their faces. Still another that had been taken at a Sears Portrait Studio, showing them artificially posed

like mannequins. And her favorite, a double frame – Molly on one side, Sam on the other.

Over the fireplace was Sam's military ribbons displayed in an oaken case. She ran her hand across the smooth wood. During his military years, he belonged to his government more than to her. Highly patriotic, he volunteered for every conflict, every war. She hated war but never told him. It had been the one secret that she had kept from him. When he came home after being gone for long stretches of time, he didn't tell her where he'd been or what he'd been doing. Because she knew the work was classified, she never asked. It was a whole part of his life she knew practically nothing about. She only knew she'd been lonely when he was away and she was lonely now.

She had outlived everyone she loved. The toughest day of her life was seeing the silver coffin containing Molly's body being winched below ground. For months afterward, she would awake in the early hours of the morning, drenched in sweat, shaking. The dream was always of her child suffocating inside a metal monster, buried beneath deep mounds of black earth, calling for help. Sam would comfort her until she could sleep again. He would tell her Molly was with God and she would see her again one day. Thankfully, with time, the dream faded.

All of her closest friends at the senior center were gone too, including her best friend Violet who died two months ago. She missed the old feline with her green eyes, fake nails and bright red lipstick which she was constantly

smudging on every piece of clothing she owned. Maeve guessed Violets' dry cleaning bills must have been enormous.

The volunteer caseworker at the senior center said she was suffering from grief overload, a condition common among the aged. She hadn't believed the young caseworker until now, until today, when she had seen the Sam-stranger.

Maeve studied her hands. No fake nails like Violet showed off and definitely without the decals that corresponded with each holiday or season. Secretly she thought they were tacky but she didn't say that to Vi, some things were best left unsaid.

It was hard to imagine these were the same hands of her youth. The joints were gnarled, resembling twisted and diseased tree branches. Dark blue veins bulged through skin that was nothing more than thin rice paper, generously peppered with age spots, some as big as peas. She put lotion in her palm, massaging it into the swollen joints. It smelled of mint and thyme. The nice young couple downstairs ran a boutique selling body products and had given it to her, in a gift basket, along with matching scented shower gel and body spritzer for Christmas. It had been tied with a red and green gingham bow. They gave a set to each tenant in the building along with a card imprinted with their company logo, The Body Store.

Sam had taken them to the shore, it was the first time either her or Molly had seen the ocean. It was exhilarating when the waves rolled in, slapping hard and loud before being sucked back out to the Atlantic. They all laughed so much

that day. The sun had been shining through a brilliant, clear sky. It felt like summer would never end. She compared her life to the water, waves rolling in and out in a rhythmic motion, bringing in the good and sometimes the bad. And so it went, in and out, good and bad, happy and sad. She knew she couldn't have the one without the other. That's what her mother had told her when she was little. With time, it had proven true.

She avoided mirrors when naked. It had become her way more and more as the years progressed. The deterioration of her body was the one thing she had trouble accepting, but now she wanted a good look to see what had changed. She undressed and studied herself in the full-length mirror, the one she had found in an antique shop years ago. Sam had hung it for her on the closet door. Its silver backing had become cracked and faded over time but she still cherished it.

The reflection showed, in stark truth, that there was no part of her body not touched by time – all of it sagging, wrinkled, and puckered. Still, it had been a good body. How many of those she loved had been ravaged by disease, by illness? She was one of the lucky ones.

One thing she never talked about with anyone out of proper decorum, not even to Vi, who hadn't known there was such a thing as boundaries, was how her pubic hair had thinned and turned completely white. Looking at the reflection of the fuzzy triangle between her legs made her think of an ornery gremlin she had once seen in a movie. The thought made her laugh.

When was the last time she had purchased new, stylish clothes? She couldn't remember. Didn't matter anymore though since there was no one to show them off to like she did for Sam or when her and Vi made a day of shopping and lunch. The feel of a new cashmere sweater never failed to make her strut around like she was Princess Grace of Monaco, lulling her into the false belief that she was a true beauty. Funny how nice clothes could alter the truth, even for a short time.

Not bothering with a robe, she went to her summer closet in the bedroom across the hall. It was the bedroom Molly stayed in when she came to visit after she had moved to Boston for work. Oh how she hated not having Molly close but she had given her space to live her own life. She believed that's what a good mother was supposed to do, let go. But if she could have her daughter back for just one day, she would have told Molly to stay close and not move to Boston, not that it would have changed Molly's mind. She was headstrong like Sam.

Maeve pushed aside hangers full of summer-shifts, capris, and tops. Mostly cotton fabrics, some with buttons, some in bright printed fabrics, others in more subdued colors. Her hand stopped when she came to the nightgown she was looking for. It was all white with delicate filigree lace around the neckline and hem, sleeveless for warmer months. Where had she bought it? Someplace expensive, but the name escaped her. She slipped it over her head without unbuttoning the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons. It smelled of cedar and the crisp fabric felt nice against her skin.

Having it on made her miss the summer sun against her face, the smell of honeysuckle vining along the front steps and eating flavored ices from the Italian grocer. The stores' owner had always flirted outrageously with her. Sam joked that he was jealous of the man's attentions but really, it made him proud that she was his wife. When the grocer passed away, she was surprised to find she missed his flirting. Now the store was run by his two sons. She had heard they were both rather promiscuous and burned through wives like some people's need for a new car every few years. Still, she never believed neighborhood gossip as being fact. Besides, they were always polite to her.

Heading back across the hall, she stopped at the thermostat mounted on the wall outside her bedroom door. She slid the small plastic switch on the bottom to the OFF position. She thought of her husband and child, thought of her friends and the grocer, thought of the Sam-stranger she had seen today, thought of the Atlantic with its always changing face.

Making her way along the front of the bedroom, she carefully opened the heavy damask drapes covering the windows that faced onto the street. With another pass, she pushed each of the windows as far up as they would open. The icy air rushing in made the gooseflesh pop-up on her arms.

At the dressing table, she pulled the pins from her hair, letting it fall to her waist. Picking up the silver-handled hairbrush Sam had given her as a wedding present, she took long slow strokes, smoothing the faded locks. When she was satisfied that each strand was in-place, she kneeled beside the bed and thanked God for all he had given her.

Struggling to stand, she forced her stiff knees to obey. Turning off the bedside lamp, she positioned herself on top of the covers, face up, with arms at her sides. Low, subdued noise from the cold city floated in through the open windows. A half-moon shed light into the dark room, sharpening the edges of the shadows and casting a grayish-blue tint on everything it touched.

She closed her eyes and pictured in her mind the tide coming in, advancing with energy and enthusiasm, crashing against the shoreline, happy to have arrived before receding back to the waiting ocean.

It was a simple thing, really, but it meant everything.

She exhaled slowly and waited for sleep to take her.

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Julio brought the front of the gurney to a stop with Giancarlo manning the back. The policeman at the street entrance filled them in on what had happened. Told how the pipes had burst because the windows were open and the heat had been turned off. Told how the water had done extensive damage to the unit below and how the young couple who lived there had called the building super after she failed to answer the door. Julio thanked him. They lugged the gurney up to her apartment and into the bedroom where someone had closed the windows and turned the heat back on.

Julio commented on how she looked completely at peace with a small smile like a Madonna. He made the sign of the cross, fished out a golden crucifix from his uniform top and kissed it before tucking it away again.

Giancarlo studied her. “Familia?”

“Probably not, not anymore,” Julio replied off-handedly as he glanced around at the yellowed photos set in overly ornate frames. “If not for the fortunate water from the burst pipes, who knows how long it would have taken to find her.”

Giancarlo nodded in agreement.

With respect, they slid her body into the thick plastic bag before lifting and placing her on the gurney. Julio looked into her angelic face one more time before pulling the zipper closed. She had felt so light. He imagined her frail bird-soul flying away through the windows into the wide sky, searching for her flock, soaring on the updrafts and out over the ocean.

He leaned over the still form and whispered, “Bless you Madonna. Vaya con dios,” and thought of his abuela with her wise eyes.

Guiding the gurney around the landing and down the stairs, he decided he would go to his madre’s house soon as his shift ended. He would stop on the way to buy pastries from the baker on the corner – the spiral ones with cinnamon made special for the holidays. They would gather round the table, his madre, abuela, and tias, they would drink strong coffee with cream and sugar, eat the flaky delicacies, and reminisce about days past. He would listen as they told tall tales about the home country. They would laugh together in the snug, warm kitchen, happily ruining their appetite for dinner. And in his prayers that night, he would remember the small frail Madonna, asking God to guide her home.