

The Woman

The young woman turned the sign to read closed and returned it to its place in the side window of the vestibule. She stepped into the sunshine pulling the heavy door shut behind her, making sure the lock engaged before skipping down the steps away from the offices of Marlow and Latham Solicitors. She drew in a deep breath and the sweet perfume of the Wisteria that clambered over the front of the Georgian building as it was carried to her on the light breeze. She walked away with a spring in her step, it was a warm day in late spring, one of those great to be alive days, and she was pleased she had decided to take her lunch hour away from the office. Her colleagues almost always remained on the premises taking their break in a small staff room at the back of the premises that hardly ever got any daylight. She on the other hand was pleased to leave behind the clacking of typewriter keys, the musty files and the reverentially hushed tones in which staff carried out their duties. She was young. She was optimistic. She had hardly started life.

She walked with a bouncy step, her feet tapping along the pavement of the busy city streets, her long auburn hair swung from side to side across her shoulders as she walked. She turned off the main road and made her way past the large war memorial with its long list of fallen heroes and on passed the imposing civic building, through the large ornate wrought iron main gates of the municipal park. On arrival she slowed her pace in order to take in the glory of the carefully attended flower beds revelling in the scent and colours they gave out. She strolled around the paths flanked by plants and shrubs, gradually abandoning all thought of the stuffy world she had just left. She found a low bench facing the sun and settled down to eat her lunch. She took from her bag a carefully wrapped package. The usual delicate sandwiches cut into four triangles. As she ate she broke off some of the crust and fed the sparrows who were so used to people that they were quite tame and came really close for tit-bits. She marvelled at how bold they were and their cheeky antics. After she had finished eating she decided she would make the most of this precious hour before returning to the eighteenth century and the job that she had held for three years four months and one week. She hitched her skirt a modest amount and leaned back on the bench, basking in the warmth of the sun on her face and on her bare legs. She felt so relaxed, listening to the chattering of the birds and to the faint hum of traffic in the city, without

opening her eyes she slipped off her shoes delighting on the coolness of the grass. She moved her feet a little she loving the feel of the fresh, springy blades of grass as they pushed up between her toes.

Three young naval ratings turned off the main road and into the park they too were enjoying the beautiful day and the sense of freedom having been released from their ship for a few hours shore leave. They were out to explore the town, maybe get a few beers later and enjoy time away from their cramped quarters. They looked very smart in their regulation navy uniform. The cap with the name of the ship they were currently crewing embroidered on the cap tally across the front. The snug fitting tunic and the bell bottom trousers pleated horizontally in seven equal sections to represent the seven oceans they all hoped eventually to sail. All were lightly tanned having come home from a recent tropical posting. The uniform, the tan and the muscled physique of the trio cut a fine image. One young man in particular had an engaging smile, showing even white teeth and he had bright twinkly eyes that crinkled when he smiled. Sailors were a familiar and welcome sight in the naval town as long as they were of good behaviour. These three young men were just out to explore what the city had to offer. The group were in good spirits, indulging in a bit of gentle banter and the usual ribbing of each other as they walked around the park, taking an interest in the aviary with its variety of captive birds and in the various statues erected to memorialise fallen heroes. The group sat down on a wall to smoke cigarettes, that's when the young man with the crinkly smile spotted her, the young woman, relaxing on a bench, with her eyes closed. Her auburn hair in soft waves gleaming in the sunlight as it fell loosely around her shoulders. So still, so serene, barely moving. He was captivated. He stared at her, noting every aspect of her trim figure and perfectly proportioned features, then taking a last deep drag on the cigarette he flicked it away as he leapt to his feet. He told his pals he'd would catch them later. Without knowing what would happen, he strode towards the most beautiful creature he thought he had ever seen.

On the radio the shipping forecast had just ended. She always made a point of listening, a habit she had had for as long as she could remember. Although it was only local weather conditions for British waters it was a habit she had started many years previously. A connection to her man, his job, his crew and to all those other unknown people who relied on the sea for a living. She clicked off the radio and said a silent prayer for all those souls at sea just as she had done for many years.

In the chair, at the left of the fireplace, the old man coughed. A rasping cough, His chest sounded bubbly and his breathing was harsh and laboured. She fitted the nebuliser mask that the old man needed to help ease his breathing. She stroked his hair and fussed at the way the straps left indentations across the old mans' cheeks adding to the myriad of lines in his leathered skin, lines she thought he earned from his time at sea sailing to foreign postings, familiar lines, lines that she loved. The skin on his face was still a little tanned, but maybe a little weathered now. His eyes still twinkled blue just like the first time she saw him although maybe with a little less clarity. The old woman moved on to dusting the delicate precious ornaments the same as she had done for decades. Lifting each one, rubbing the duster over the surface before placing it back in the same spot and moving on to another. Little gifts and mementos from faraway places. Places she had only ever visited in her imagination she felt she knew from how they were described to her in letters her husband sent home. Places he made sound exotic and full of excitement but which also kept them apart.

The old woman settled herself in to the chair on the other side of the fireplace. The gas flame flickered. Steam gently hissed as it escaped from the nebulizer mask. She stretched her legs out in front of her, glad for the warmth of the fire on her legs. She leaned back in the chair, letting her grey hair touch the cushioned head rest and closed her eyes. Slipping off her well -worn slippers she rubbed her bare feet in the deep piled rug feeling the springy tufts push up between her toes.