

THE STORIES HIDDEN BY DUST

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I

WITH A SMALL SIGH, I knock on the door to Miss Marie's house.

It was a well known fact around town—a generous term for the small village I lived in—that Miss Marie was a bit on the eccentric side.

I didn't *want* to be here. She was crazy, her house was full of cats, and it smelled like cheese.

Or so I've heard.

My boyfriend had tried his best to convince me that she wasn't crazy, but I had seen what she did. Kept odd hours, offered nasty caramels to any kid she met as she walked, never left her house. Everyone knew she had lost her marbles years ago.

But, I needed the money. I had just gotten fired from my summer job for something I hadn't done and I needed the gas money. Pride stopped me from going to my parents for help.

"Melanie!" Miss Marie opened the door with a smile.

For someone who was in her nineties, she looked incredibly healthy. She had a wrinkled face, accentuated by a wide smile. And leaned on a cane made of polished wood. Carefully styled white hair and bright blue eyes gave her a friendly, grandmother-like air.

"Call me Annie," I say, coming into the old and weathered house. It didn't smell like cheese, and I didn't see cats. It actually looked rather cozy.

Miss Marie tuts and says, "My dear, you must be cold. Come into the kitchen first. I made hot chocolate."

"Really, I don't—"

"I insist."

With no room to argue, I followed Miss Marie into the depths of her kitchen.

"This is amazing!" I say, sipping the hot chocolate, which I loaded with generous amounts of whipped cream. The warm liquid helped heat my chilled fingers.

"Thank you. It's a recipe I learned when I was in Belgium for vacation one year."

"You went to Belgium?" I had a hard time

believing that Miss Marie could travel. An old lady tottering around New York Square? Please.

"Oh yes. And Paris. Germany. All over the states. Russia too; beautiful country with nice people. Although, I suppose it was the Soviet Union then."

"*You? Went to the Soviet Union?*"

She smiled. "But, that is a story for another time. I won't bore you with an old lady's rambling."

II

Boxes and dust were my first impression of the attic.

"I can do this by myself. Really," I say. But the doubt in my voice was evident.

In truth, I didn't want to talk to Miss Marie. She annoyed me. And she was crazy; everyone said so. It would take me forever, but I could do it by myself.

"Nonsense! I will oversee what you throw away, decide what I should keep, and do the dusting. You lift the heavy stuff," she says. "Besides, it's lonely up here. You don't need to stay here by yourself."

Wonderful. The old bat would be watching me.

I sit down on the floor and begin to sift through boxes.

The first few were mostly papers and outdated receipts. Miss Marie tossed a few in the trash, telling me—rather unnecessarily—that it was useless to her.

When I went to lift another, larger box, it was too heavy to lift. I frowned and opened it.

Inside where books, tightly packed together.

"Who's Hemmingway?" I asked, picking up a book. *The Old Man and the Sea*.

"A writer. An excellent one at that." Miss Marie hobbles over, throwing the rag she was dusting over her shoulder. "I met him once, you know."

"Really?"

"Mhm." Miss Marie got a dreamy look on her face. She seemed to be looking straight into the past. "It was 1927, when I was nineteen. His last year in Paris, and a few years before the stock market crash. Terrible time, that was. We lost nearly everything. But you don't care about that. Where was I?"

"Paris. Hemmingway."

"Ah, yes. Him. It was in a restaurant. I dragged my boyfriend at the time, Pierre—" my eyes widen in surprise at that "—and I talked to him and got my book signed. *The Sun Also Rises*."

As she spoke, I dug through the box.

I pulled out the book she was referring to and opened the inside cover. Sure enough, inside, in neat handwriting, was the signature of the author.

To Marie. Thank you for your kind words. Hemmingway.

"Here, read this." Miss Marie hands me the copy of *The Old Man and the Sea*. "If you like it, keep it."

"Really?" I asked, honored she would let me borrow a book by an author she obviously held dear to her heart.

"Really."

III

"What did you think of the book?" Miss Marie asked as we climbed slowly up the stairs to the attic.

"I loved it. Read it all last night; stayed up till midnight to finish."

She smiled. "Wonderful! Why don't you take home whatever book you find up there. They will get donated or pitched otherwise."

"Oh Miss Marie, I can't. They mean so much to you. Don't you want to keep it?"

"I insist."

I smile and nod, entering the attic with excitement. Yesterday I had made a lot of progress and couldn't wait to see what else I could find. From downstairs, the phone rang.

"Oh, that must be Veronika. She always calmed around this time of the week. Mind if I—"

"Go take the call," I tell her. "Talk as long as you like, I'm fine up here."

Veronika, I had learned, had been someone Miss Marie had met overseas on one of her many vacations. They quickly became penpals, and exchanged phone numbers later in life so they could talk more frequently and much longer.

As I began to lift more boxes, the bottom of one fell out. Papers and photos went flying across the attic floor.

Out of curiosity, I began to study the photos. They were black and white. I couldn't tell what they were at first, but once I read the labels I realized it was a log of Miss Marie's

time in the war.

"I can't believe it!" I say. "Marie fought in the war!"

At first, I tried to steer clear of the letters. I didn't want to invade her privacy. But I soon caved and opened one.

It was from a man named John Hurst. He was very obviously in love with Miss Marie, and I could only assume she had responded in kind.

For hours, I sat there reading letters and learning history.

"You were in World War Two!?" I ask Miss Marie when she hobbles back into the attic.

"Mhm," she says. "I told you I went to Germany."

"You didn't tell me you *served*." I brandished the letters. "You were amazing! Healing the sick, going through enemy fire to save people's lives; you were one of the most important people in the war!"

Miss Marie smiles. "I'm honored you think so."

I wrap my arms around her small frame and hug her tightly. "I'm so glad I met you."

IV

"Annie?"

I turn to find my boyfriend, Christopher, standing in the stairway.

"Hey Chris." He was one of the few kids on the block who regularly visited Miss Marie. He got her newspaper on days it was snowy or rainy, and walked with her on days it was sunny or warm. And the reason I found this job.

"Miss Marie said you were up here, cleaning."

"Yeah. And?"

"It's date night."

My eyes widen as I gasp. "I completely forgot! Miss Marie had all these cool stories and I was so busy trying to finish this up and I forgot and I'm sorry."

Christopher laughs lightly. "It's okay. I just figured I'd bring the date to you. Miss Marie said to feel free to come up here."

From behind his back he shows me Chinese take out. I grin.

"You're the best."

Miss Marie finds the two of us hunched over an ancient record player, arguing with each other.

"Stop that."

"You're going to break it."

"Nu-uh."

"Yeah huh!"

"No I'm no-"

"Here, allow me," Miss Marie said, startling us both. She turns it on and a jazzy piece begins to play.

Christopher pulls me to the middle of the room and tries to get me to dance, as he usually did whenever a song came on. With a little persuasion, he gets me to smile and I start to slow dance with him, leaning my head against his chest.

Miss Marie shakes her head with a smile on her face. "Tut tut. You need the proper clothes to be dancing. Follow me." She points to Christopher.

"In the trunk over there are some suits."

She leads me down the stairs to a closet full of dresses. Instantly, my eyes land on a deep blue one.

"You want me to wear one of these?" I ask, a little shocked she would let me wear such beautiful dresses.

"Go right ahead."

I slip off to the bathroom. When I come out, Miss Marie nods approvingly.

"Come on. Glenn Miller was a genius, and I don't want you to miss a second of this."

We walk back up the stairs and I find Christopher looking sharp in a blue suit to match my dress.

A new song comes on, which I later learned was called "In the Mood," and Christopher grabs my hands, starting to dance. I'm sure we looked ridiculous, but I could care less.

Miss Marie sits on a trunk, watching us with a smile. "Ah, to be young and in love," she says.

V

When I finished cleaning, I was a bit disappointed. The attic was spotless, and we could move freely about. But there was something about the friendship I made with Miss Marie, and the fun I had learning about history, that I was going to miss.

"I'll visit often," I promise, hugging her.

"I'll make sure of it," Miss Marie says.

I laugh. "I'm sure you will. Hobbling after me in the streets, chasing me with your cane."

Miss Marie smiles and hands me an envelope. "Twenty dollars per day, as promised. A grand total of a hundred dollars."

I stare at the money. The whole reason I had taken this job.

"You know what? Keep it. I hear the grocery store is hiring."

Years later, I still reflected on

those five days as the most fun I ever had.

One day, at the dawn of 2020, my mother called me unexpectedly.

“Hi mom,” I say, carefully driving through busy New York. “I’m almost to the library. I’ll have the files then. You’re really lucky my boss was sending me here anyway, or else it would be months before I had a chance to get them to you.”

“I’m not calling about that.”

“Can it wait? New York is awful busy and-”

“It’s about Miss Marie.”

“Oh.” My heart sunk.

“I’m afraid she passed away this morning.”

I knew it was coming. She was, after all, one hundred and twelve. But that didn’t stop the tears from springing up in my eyes.

“I know you two were close.”

“Yeah,” I croaked out. “She’s who got me into history, and being a historian. Was it peaceful at least?”

“Very,” my mother assured me. “She told me to tell you that she was going to miss you, and that you were the best friend she could’ve asked for.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I gotta go.”

“Bye sweetheart.”

I hang up and throw the phone in the passenger seat.

Oh, how it seemed like yesterday I was in that attic, fifteen years old, cleaning and choking on dust. *