



Death Angel, 96

Shannon Haynes

After her son died, Marsha didn't care anymore—about any of it. He wasn't even a good son. He was a selfish prick. He only visited once or twice a year. When he did, all he ever talked about were his corporate adventures, his career achievements, and of course all the things that annoyed him about her.

When John from across the hall found out about her son, he tried to comfort her. Tears ran down the canyons of her cheeks, but she couldn't think how to explain what she felt. She blurted out the one thing that came to her, "I've known him for such a very long time."

She was ninety-six. Her son was born when she was only sixteen. Eighty years. That's a long time to know someone. He was such a pretty baby. Chubby as could be. He won the first-place ribbon in the baby beauty contest at the county fair all those years ago. Now he was gone. All she could think was, *why wasn't she?* It wasn't right. And it wasn't fair.

All over the news they were talking about this pandemic. People were dying left and right. You could get it from breathing. You could get it from touching something someone else touched. She heard that in New York, so many died in one week that bodies were piled like cordwood in the morgues before they could haul them off for burial.

Born in the 1920's, Marsha had just missed the Spanish Flu. She guessed this pandemic was a lot like that, another clean-out sent by God. She had told John, "We can't know His reasons, but they aren't that hard to spot, are they? There are just too darn many souls stomping around on the earth these days."

There were so many things that didn't make sense about living so long. Her entire body always hurt. Always. Everywhere. She had become birdlike, her bones light, her skin thin. She only lacked the feathers. Maybe she was less like a bird and more like they say about women her age—a bat.

She couldn't see much anymore, a glimmer of shadows and colors on a good day, enough to fumble through her condo, find the phone by memory, order lunch from the cafeteria. If she misplaced her hearing aids it was not a funny joke at all. She couldn't even hear on the phone to call for help. Not that she would ever ask for help, not with her mother's words forever in her head, "Never be a beggar."

Her mother left this world in her sleep one night, before she was even seventy. *That would be the way to go, wouldn't it?* Her father passed not long after that.

Mechanical, like some kind of wind-up toy, he would go out for a long walk on his skinny spider legs every morning. After that he would go all day and just quietly get things done. When he broke his foot and couldn't walk anymore, he shot himself in the head like a lame horse—left such a mess.

Death was always near. A person in her building died almost every day from something. A fall. A bad heart. It was becoming harder for her to make friends knowing tomorrow they might be gone. *Would her friend John be next? Was the companionship worth it?* She supposed it was. She was never good at being alone.

This pandemic was particularly dangerous for old people. For their safety, the residents in her building were not allowed to leave their condos at all. No bingo. No craft time. No dining together. No sharing memories. If her son were alive, and had wanted to visit, he couldn't have.

If it weren't for sneaking across the hall to see John, the only people she would see would be masked and gloved staff scurrying in three times a day with boxes full of breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The lockdown was only supposed to be for a couple of weeks. She'd been through worse, she'd been through the depression, lived in a shack with a dirt floor and no running water for heaven's sake. This was not hardship. But three months later, they were still prisoners. Except now her son was gone. She had all she could take.

At 2 AM, she put on her softest-soled shoes and scooted down the hall to the elevator. She made it out the front door into the darkness outside. Breathing hard from the exertion, she pushed herself along to the sidewalk toward the gas station next door. A man's voice called from the garage at the far end of the building, "Ma'am?"

It was the night guard. She'd have to move faster! This would be her only chance! She scooted, scooted, scooted. She heard the squeaking tires of a car pulling up to a pump. A car door opened. She shuffled quickly toward the sound. "Excuse me, Ma'am?" said the man getting out of the car.

She said nothing but reached out her hand desperately in the direction of the blurry shape that had to be the pump. "Ma'am! Are you okay?"

Just then, the guard put a hand on her shoulder. "Let me go, you stinker! Let me go!" she yelled.

"Sorry about this," said the guard to the man at the pump. And then to his walky-talky, "Jason, I need your help quick, a resident is down here at the gas station!"

She stretched out her left hand in one final effort, tipping her walker sideways, falling to the left. She fell onto it! The pump handle! She grabbed it as hard as she could, breaking her fall with greasy rubberized plastic, the metal trigger cool under her fingers, a wide smile on her face.

"What is she doing?!" asked the man.

Before the guard could react, she let go of the pump handle, stuck out her tongue and licked one long wide lick across her palm and fingers. She grinned. Done!

