

The Swan Lady

By
Dan Bracewell

“Sweet Mary Mother of God. You’re still not asleep are you, Katie?”

I pressed the telephone receiver to my ear and squinted at the clock next to the bed.

Christ. 10:20 already?

“No. I’m awake. What’s up, Ma?”

“I need you to do me a favor. Aunt Evelyn called. She was supposed to take Aunt Aideen out to the park today, but won’t be able to go. They asked me to do it, but I have to bring your father to the chiropractor at one. You think you could do it for me?”

My boyfriend Jason was snoring next to me, his hand dangling over my side. I hated when he did that. I pushed it off and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. “Dad to the chiropractor?”

“My God, Katie, you aren’t listening. It’s almost ten-thirty. Are you really not up yet?”

I put my feet on the floor. They almost landed in an open box of pizza. I kicked it to the side. “I’m up, Ma. Quit bitchin. What is it that you want me to do?”

“I said I want you to take Aunt Aideen to the park.”

I had to think about that for a moment. For one, I was still groggy and second, I didn’t remember an Aunt Aideen. Then it dawned on me—ma was talking about the Swan Lady. Christ, was that woman still alive?

Jason was stirring now. I watched his naked buttocks as he pushed himself out of the bed and walked into the nearby bathroom and took a pee. “What time?”

“Evelyn usually picks her up between 11:30 and 12.”

I ran through my head what all I had to do today. I touched a ring of my brown hair that was losing what body it had left. I was getting a perm at 4:30. Other than that, my day was free. Still, I would have much rather gone back to bed. Jason and I had been up late last night. Instead I found myself saying, “Sure. Yeah. I can do it. Where is she?”

“She’s over at the Lir Nursing Home on the upper east side. It’s on 79th Street.”

I cursed myself for saying I’d do it. I’d have to go now if I was going to beat the traffic.

“There’s a place in the Park where she always goes—there by the Bow Bridge,” Ma said. “She likes to look at the swans.”

Right. The swans. Crazy old swan lady.

“Thanks, Katie.”

Whatever. I hung up the phone. Jason walked back into the room and plopped his naked self onto the bed and tried to nuzzle, but I pushed him and his nasty morning breath away.

“Not now, Jason. I have to go do an errand for Ma.”

He nipped at my ear. “I’d be quick.”

“I have to go.”

I walked to the bathroom and almost tripped over a pile of Betamax tapes. There was a beer bottle in the sink. I tossed it in the trash. As I brushed my teeth, Jason clicked through Saturday morning cartoons. He stopped on the *Smurfs*.

“Where you going that’s so important?” he asked.

I picked out some torn jeans from the laundry basket that was half-filled with clothes I hadn’t put away yet.

“Ma wants me to take the Swan Lady to the park.”

“Swan Lady?”

I cinched up the buttons across my belly. I was getting fat. It’s all that stupid pizza and beer we were always eating. I felt a grapefruit diet coming on. “God. I haven’t seen her since—Jesus, I don’t know how long. Since I was little, I guess.”

I grabbed a green over-sized sweatshirt hanging over a chair and pulled it over my head. The torn collar fell over my bare shoulder.

Jason fished around under a pile of used Kleenex on the nightstand and produced his Marlboros.

“And they call her the swan lady?”

“Yeah. It’s what everyone calls her. She’s always going down to the park to watch the swans. It’s all she ever wants to do. It’s about the only thing I remember about her. That and she smells like mothballs.”

“Fun.” He looked under the bed and found his lighter.

I thought I might ask him to come, but he’d just be bored and get into mischief. I pulled on my pink jelly shoes and grabbed my purse. As I walked out the door, he called out.

“Hey, Katie?”

I turned, thinking he might want to go after all.

He lit a cigarette. “Know the difference between Irish girls and trash?”

I didn’t answer. He was always coming up with the Irish jokes at my expense.

“Trash gets picked up.”

I gave a sideways smile. “Lucky for me you know the difference, asshole.”

* * *

As I drove through the traffic, I thought about Aunt Aideen. Hard as I could, I couldn’t quite place her face. I heard Ma and some of my other relatives refer to her every now and then. Crazy old Swan Lady they’d call her. They said she had been in a mental institution once. I wasn’t exactly sure how she was related to the family. Being Irish, we seemed to have relatives all over. I think mother told me that she was my great grandfather’s cousin. She had come over on the boat a hundred years ago or something like that. She used to live in those old tenement buildings that everyone saw in those history books. You know, the ones with all the poor people from the old New York slums? Aunt Aideen was probably in one of the photos for all I knew.

I walked into the lobby of the Lir Nursing Home. I hated these places. Nursing homes were so depressing with their white halls and florescent lights. They all had that peculiar smell—bleach, dried urine and something else. Approaching death, maybe? An old man in a wheel chair stared at me with his mouth’s agape as I walked up to the receptionist and told her who I was and who I was here for.

I waited impatiently, trying not to stare at the old people and their outdated hair styles and dingy old-fashioned clothes. I wondered if I would be wearing leg warmers and ripped jeans when I got that age.

One of the nursing aides came down the hall pushing an old woman in a wheel chair. I figured this was Aunt Aideen. Her oily gray hair was tied back in a bun. A worn out green and black afghan was thrown over her legs. She was toying with a rosary in her spotted arthritic hands.

I forced a smile. “Hello, Aunt Aideen.”

Aunt Aideen turned to the nurse. The nurse bent down so aunt Aideen’s mouth was next to her ear.

“I don’t know her,” I heard Aunt Aideen whisper.

She had a strong Irish brogue. Some of the older members of the family had it. I always liked hearing it and wished I could talk like that.

“I’m Katie, Evelyn’s niece,” I explained. “She couldn’t make it today.”

Aunt Aideen pulled at the rosary, as if deciding to go with me. I was actually hoping she would decide not to and I felt a little guilty for it. How often did she receive visitors, I wondered.

“I was going to take you to the park,” I said. “To see the swans.”

“See there?” the nurse said. “You’ll have a great time.”

Aunt Aideen peered up at me with her large hazel eyes. “I want to see the swans.”

“That’s where we are going.” I took the wheelchair from the nurse and pushed Aunt Aideen down the hall.

I helped her get into my orange Pinto and turned out into the traffic. Geez, the car was going to

smell like mothballs for weeks.

As we drove toward central park, the quiet between us was too weird. I had to make some type of conversation, I supposed.

“So . . . how are you?” I asked.

“Tired,” she said softly.

I wasn't sure exactly what to say to her. She was practically a stranger. How strange, and somewhat sad, that we should be related and I had no idea who she was.

“I guess you have seen this city change a lot, huh?”

She looked out the window. “Yes. Lots of changes.”

I saw Aunt Aideen perk. She motioned with shaking hands toward the steering wheel.

“Engaged, are ya?” She saw my engagement ring.

“Yes.”

I don't think I had invited her to the wedding and felt a sting of guilt. Jason and I both had large families and didn't want to slight anyone. We had decided instead we would have a small one—with just our parents and a few close friends.

“What's his name?”

“Jason Parker.”

Her shoulders sagged. She suddenly lost interest and looked out the window.

I parked the car at the Met and wheeled her through Central Park. I hadn't been here since John Lennon's memorial service last year and just being here made me sad thinking of it. The park was packed today as it was a gorgeous spring day. The lush green lawns were filled with sunbathers. Men and boys fished along the waters. People were jogging, reading on the park benches, playing chess.

We finally came to the old cast iron Bow Bridge crossing the Lake. The picturesque structure spanned from the flower side of Cherry Hill to the sprawling woodland on the other. We went across and stopped at a couple of benches nearby. I wheeled up next to one that wasn't occupied and faced Aunt Aideen towards the water. The Majestic and the San Remo was prominent along the city sky line in the distance.

“How is this, Aunt Aideen?”

“Good. Thank you.”

I looked around. It was pretty. Might be a good place to get married. Jason and I still hadn't settled on a venue yet. He wanted to get married on the Jersey shore and I wanted a church. Maybe this could be a compromise.

“I don't see any swans,” I noted.

She looked around. “Maybe they are just a little late. They are sometimes.”

I wondered what I was supposed to do while she sat there. Was I suppose to talk to her? Or did she want to be left alone?

“Is there anything you need?” I asked. “I got a bottle of water here.”

The cool breeze waved a strand of her hair. “I'm fine. Thank you.”

There was a magician nearby doing tricks with rings for some children. I watched him for awhile then remembered I had a book in my purse I hadn't read in over a month.

“I'm going to sit on this bench and read,” I said. “Let me know if there is anything you want.”

She didn't reply. I sat down and pulled out Danielle Steel's *Season of Passion*. Ma had loaned it to me a year ago and I had read it on and off since. I only had a few more chapters. Maybe I could finish it while Aunt Aideen watched the swans.

I had only read a page when my eyes kept falling back on Aunt Aideen. I felt guilty just letting her sit there alone. Her head turned back and forth, undoubtedly looking for the still missing swans. I could sense her distress. I had seen swans in the park numerous times. It seemed they were always in a different spot every time I came, though.

“Aunt Aideen,” I said. “I could wheel you around the park a little. Maybe we can find some

swans elsewhere.”

I heard her whimper.

I stood. “Aunt Aideen?”

Her face turned heavenward, “Oh please. Don't let them have died. Please. Not yet. Surely, there is time left.”

“Aunt Aideen,” I put my hand on her shoulder. “Oh, darling, please don't cry.”

Aunt Aideen pressed her spotted hand to her eyes. Her shoulders were quaking. I couldn't help it, she seemed so vulnerable. I hugged her. She smelled of dried urine.

“I'm never going to see them again.” Her lip quivered. She toyed with her rosary and kept looking at the water.

“I've seen plenty of swans in the park,” I said. “Maybe they are just elsewhere.”

“No,” she said. “Not these swans.”

I pulled some Kleenex out of my purse and handed it to her. She dabbed her eyes. “It's too late,” she said. “It's too late . . .”

I stroked her hair. “What is too late?”

She looked away, back toward the lake.

I wasn't sure I had ever seen someone so sad. Her very soul seemed to have been crushed. She had lived a long time and seen so much. I imagined how difficult it must be to live that age and see all your loved ones go before you. It must be a lonely life, especially when all your kin thought you were crazy.

I scanned the lake, hoping for her sake that the swans would appear. I began to wonder.

“Aunt Aideen,” I said. “Why are you so fascinated with the swans?”

She fiddled with her rosary. I knew she had heard my questions. She was avoiding me.

“Please. I will not laugh.”

She looked at me with her sad eyes, still red and brimmed with tears. “They locked me away.”

“Locked you away? Who locked you away?”

“Men. When I told them about the swans. They locked me away, they did.”

She had to be speaking of the mental institution.

“I will not harm you. You can tell me.”

Aunt Aideen looked at her lap. “What does it matter anyway? It's over.”

I held her crumbled hands in mine. “Please.” Maybe if she told someone, it would make her feel better.

Finally, she nodded her head. She would not hold my gaze. She seemed to be looking far off into another time.

“When I was younger, we lived in a little apartment. It was no bigger than a bathroom. Me, my Pa, my Ma, my two brothers and a sister and several boarders.”

“I had heard you lived in those old tenement buildings.”

“It was a terrible place. Filthy. One of us was always sick. There was so much crime and violence. There were gangs. Fighting they always were. Someone always got hurt. Or killed. The Irish called themselves “Hudson Dusters.” The Italians called themselves “The Five Points Gang.” Hated each other we did.

“My Ma died when I was six. Pa married her sister a few weeks later. She was a beautiful woman, but crazy and a drunkard. She'd beat us until we bled. Threatened to kill us. I think she hated that Pa loved us more than her.”

I was finding more appreciation for this old woman. What a terrible life she had lived.

“I thought she would kill us. But instead she did something worse.”

She looked at her lap and tore apart the Kleenex. I encouraged her to continue.

“There was an old witch that lived over in the Bowery. Everyone was afraid of her. They say she had magic from the old country—terrible magic. My step ma must have visited her. One day, my

sister and brothers were outside playing. I was inside, sick with the fever. I watched from a window as they played in an old lot, wanting to join them. My step ma appeared. My siblings were afraid. But instead of beating them, she took out three silver necklaces. Pretty things they were—sparkled in the sun. I can see them. She gave them to each of my siblings. They were so excited and danced in a little circle. Then my step ma got this look on her face, like the devil himself. She pointed a finger at my brothers and sister and said, 'Hence forth your cries shall be the flocks of birds.' She struck her palm against a barrel. My brothers and sisters grew white feathers. I can still hear them screaming. They were turned into swans.”

If it had been under normal circumstances, I would have laughed my ass off then and there. But she was so sad and so sincere. I didn't have the heart to.

“I heard her tell them as they flapped away that they would remain swans until the time a Hudson Duster and a member of the Five Points Gang married—a thing unthinkable. She came looking for me, but I hid until my Pa came home. He didn't believe my brother and sisters were turned into swans. He was certain my step ma had killed them. He beat her until she was black and blue and chased her away. We never saw her again. People say she jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.”

She turned to me with those hazel eyes, probably expecting me to call her crazy. She certainly was, but I would never say it. I ran my hand across her face. The poor thing.

“Thank you, Aunt Aideen. Your story is safe with me.”

And I meant it.

A small smile formed on her old face and her eyes wandered back to the lake. She gasped.

“There!”

I turned to see three swans paddle under the bridge toward us. They were graceful things with their long necks, but as they approached, I began to realize that they were incredibly old. They were all losing feathers. Two had clouded eyes. One's wing was misshaped. I wondered how long swans lived.

Aunt Aideen was so excited to see them she nearly fell out her chair. She crossed herself and kissed her rosary. “Sweet Mary of the Gael, thank you.”

She produced a little brown bag from under her afghan and began throwing crumbs of bread at the birds. “Please, don't scare me like that again. . .”

I looked on as she threw the bread. She laughed and talked to the swans as if she were actually having a conversation with them. I put my hand on her shoulder, thankful to see her happy and to have made a friend.

* * *

Jason waved his hand across his nose at the smell of my new perm as I walked into the apartment.

“Whew. Nice hair,” he said.

He had gotten Chinese take out and was arranging it on the coffee table. I scanned the clock. *Different Strokes* would be on in a few. I picked some mail out of the seat and tossed it on the floor as I sat down next to him.

“How was your day with the crazy old bird lady?” he asked.

His comment made me mad.

“Quit being a shit head. She's just an old woman, Jason.”

I opened a box of General Tsao's. “Her mind is fucked up. God. Poor thing. I wonder if I'll be that way when I get that age.”

“Probably. That thing runs in the family. Our kids will probably get it too.”

I quickly told him about my day, but I left out the part about Aunt Aideen's saying her brothers and sister turned into swans. I gave a promise and that story would go with me to my grave. Jason was interested in Aideen's story about the street gangs, though.

“No shit?” he asked. He dug his chopsticks into the chow mein. “Maybe one of my ancestors whacked one of yours back in the day.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My grandmother was Italian—an Antonelli. She grew up down there where your swan lady lived. In those old slums. I remember her talking about it.”

“You're shitting me. You're Italian?”

“Grandma was Italian,” he corrected as he turned up the TV.

I put my hand to my chin and looked out the window. “I'll be damned.”

* * *

I was only half listening as Father O'Brian said, “You may now kiss the bride.”

Jason grabbed me by the waist and sucked me into his arms. When our lips touched, the small gathering of onlookers clapped. Jason squeezed me against his hip as Ma's Polaroid buzzed out a picture.

“One more,” she said. She pointed to the middle of the Bow Bridge. “Harold you get in the picture this time.”

She motioned for my father to stand next to me.

Our wedding wasn't exactly the way I had imagined it. It was quick and to the point, but it would do. I adjusted the shoulder pads on my green dress before Ma took another picture. A man on roller skates zipped by and shouted, “Gotta love New York!”

Jason's mother squeezed my cheeks. It was the first time I really noticed that she looked Italian. I always thought she was Jewish.

Down by the water was Aunt Aideen. I had invited her to the ceremony. She had wanted to look at the swans instead of watching the wedding, though. That had been fine with me, but Ma was a little put off by it. She didn't understand why I had invited her in the first place.

I had been watching Aunt Aideen throughout the ceremony. The old swans had appeared just as the nuptials had started. I had a hard time not looking at them. I laughed at myself. What a silly notion. Was I actually expecting them to turn back into people as soon as Jason and I were married?

Jason pulled off his jacket, threw it over his shoulder, lit a cigarette, and with a cool tone said to my mother, “Hey, Mrs. M. What's the difference between Irish girls and trash?”

I rolled my eyes. “Jason, can you quit being a dickhead at least on our wedding day?”

Jason wasn't listening to me nor was he paying attention to my mother either. He was looking off the bridge toward the water.

“What the--?”

Everyone turned.

Aunt Aideen was out of her wheel chair and ankle deep in the lake. Her arms were spread towards three elderly people walking towards her. They were dressed in old-fashioned clothes—really old fashioned, like something out of Charlie Chaplin. White feathers cascaded off their backs.

I couldn't believe it. “Oh . . . my . . . God . . .”

The four siblings embraced each other. Their laughter scattered through the nearby trees like children.

* * *

Before the hour was over, Aunt Aideen and her brothers and sister were gone. Just like that. It seemed strange that we had all been celebrating mine and Jason's big day and then the next, there were ambulances in the park.

The paramedics said it was the strangest thing they had ever seen. It was as if the four elderly people had all died of heart failure simultaneously. I figured their poor tired hearts were just so overjoyed to see one another after all these years, they couldn't take it.

No one knew exactly what to make of the whole situation. They all wanted to know where these three people came from and why was Aunt Aideen embracing them? And why were they in the water of all things? I kept my mouth shut. I had promised never to tell.

Ma was upset about it all and had been in tears. "How could she do something like this? Of all days! Your poor wedding."

I wasn't angry though. The four of them had all died embracing one another. I couldn't have thought of a happier or more beautiful ending for the Swan Lady or her swans. Jason and I spoke about that day long afterwards. We talked about the wonder of it all, but most of all, we talked about how when it was time to go, we hoped we died in the arms of the ones we loved the most.