

*Strong Enough to Carry Him* originally appeared in Gettysburg Review Issue 29:2 Summer 2016

When an old man's body was found stuffed into a big, ratty, old suitcase, ditched in the winter behind an abandoned building in the Bronx, it didn't take the police long to find the makeshift undertaker. The woman's name and address were scribbled in childlike cursive on a piece of masking tape that had long before been affixed to a spot just below the handle. The police were waiting at her door when she got home from work. She invited them in and didn't run out of words until they ran out of questions.

For several days in a row, she'd seen the old guy slumped on the bus-stop bench outside her tenement building. His puppy-dog eyes reminded her of how she figured her father's eyes would've looked if he'd stuck around long enough for her to know. And his long black fingers—surprising since he wasn't exactly a big man—looked like they might be able to reach up behind the dripping pipe under her kitchen sink that the building manager couldn't seem to get around to fixing, even though plenty of times he did get around to saying he would. The old man had a certain air about him that wasn't so easy to describe. Something about him made her comfortable enough that she offered up her couch to him without even a proper introduction. If she thought about it, maybe it was that he looked like a black version of the man on the front of the oatmeal box—they had the same long white hair that came down to their chins, and the same black hats. Who wouldn't trust the oatmeal guy? He must have sensed that she was pretty trustworthy herself since he clambered up four flights of stairs behind her, just like that. And wouldn't you know it: he just happened to have a crescent wrench, carted around in a backpack with the rest of

his worldly possessions, and with it, and those long fingers, he fixed her leaking faucet, lickety-split.

He didn't say much of anything the first few days, but she did enough talking for the both of them. She told him things you don't normally tell people you just met, like how old she was the first time she had sex (twelve), how much she currently weighed (quite a bit more than she weighed the first time she had sex), and which was her favorite brand of deodorant (Dove Go Fresh that smelled like cucumber, but that she only bought when it was on sale at Rite Aid). She told him about her mother constantly dragging different men home the entire time she was growing up, and asked him if his mom did the same thing, or if he had a different kind of mother. She asked if he had brothers or sisters, half-brothers or half-sisters, brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law, nieces or nephews, and if there were cousins. She wanted to know if his cousins' brothers-in-law were considered part of the tribe in his family, the way she'd always wished things had been in hers, which consisted, pretty much, of her now-deceased mother and her mother's sister, who was living in a rest home and didn't recognize her anymore. She wanted to know if he had any sons or daughters he knew about, and while she didn't mean to offend anyone, you have to admit that sometimes it happens that way. She wondered if he'd ever seen someone on the street and thought it might be a son or daughter he never even knew belonged to him. He mostly just shook his head no in reply.

The old man made himself useful straight away. After fixing the leaky faucet, he repaired the jiggly handle on the toilet and tightened up the toilet seat, even if he did forget to put it down sometimes. He used his crescent wrench like a hammer and pounded in some nails to support the curtain rod in the living room. He straightened the velvet painting of Jesus on the cross hanging

in the hallway right outside the woman's bedroom door. The woman watched him work and kept him company while he twisted and hammered. She told him that she wished she'd had a father who'd taught her how to do those things, since there are some skills you just can't pick up from someone else—like one of your mother's overnight boyfriends, for example, who couldn't have cared less if the toilet handle jiggled. It'd be good to be able to fix things up just because she liked her things fixed up. If she'd been able to fix things like the old man did, she might even have considered setting up a little handywoman business and gotten paid for doing things people needed done. But then wouldn't she have dreamed about passing the business on to her grandchildren? She was too old to have kids, much less grandkids, and, of course, if she'd had a grandson it might be he was a boy like one of those she sees on the street every day: holding up the side of some building like he owns the place when all along he's probably just there to sell drugs. That would just break her heart, so maybe she should just count her blessings. The old man shrugged and asked her to please hold the nails until he needed one.

A few days later, after he got his bearings, the old man told the woman he'd like to return her kindness and offered to do the grocery shopping and cooking while she worked at her job at the dry cleaners. She was used to eating SpaghettiOs with meatballs, store-brand boxed macaroni and cheese from the "past date" bin at the bodega on the corner, and fried bologna and American cheese sandwiches (like those that one of her mother's boyfriends who hung around the longest had taught her how to make, but it was probably best if she not talk about what else he'd taught her). So the idea of having actual homemade meals shook her up a little, in a good way.

She accepted his offer, but told him that whatever he bought had to come from her food stamps and the forty dollars she budgeted for food every month. It never dawned on her when

she handed him a fist full of dollar bills and her food card that he might just take off and never return. She worried instead that her neighbors might see him coming and going and jump to the wrong conclusion, even if that would be pretty funny considering she'd not had any visitors—much less any male visitors—in a good long time, and he was, after all, so much older than her. And she worried that the building manager would figure she had an illegal roommate and evict her for breaking the rules. She forgot all about worrying about the neighbors and the manager after coming home from her job at the cleaners to the smell of pork chops and apple sauce warmed up and wearing a sprinkle of cinnamon, and eventually the likes of chipped beef on toast, meatloaf and boiled green beans, scrambled eggs and biscuits and gravy (everyone loves breakfast for dinner once in awhile, he'd said). One night, he made a homemade ham-and-cheddar quiche, which hadn't been her favorite, though she did have to admit it had a crust you could only dream of. During that first supper they shared at her kitchen card table, she told him how much she loved Friendly's strawberry ice cream, and what do you know? It was his favorite, too.

One oddly warm late fall night after dinner while the woman sat fanning herself with a flyer from a Chinese restaurant she'd found tied to the handrail of her stairs, the man set down, on the suitcase she used as a coffee table, the dog-eared copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* he'd been reading. She'd found the suitcase in an alley years ago, back when she dreamed about traveling the world, but as it turned out sometimes you need a coffee table more than you need a suitcase, and this one, big and boxy and hard-sided, was just right. He pulled a deck of cards out of his backpack. "I was wondering if you'd go on reading that book forever," the woman said. "I can't read like that or my eyes start to burn. Don't yours?"

The old man asked if he could join her at the table and brought the deck with him when she suggested he didn't have to be so formal and ask permission now that they were proper roommates and all. She'd never heard of the Mille Bornes, the strange French card game he loved to play, and while she eventually agreed to adopt his pronunciation of the first word (though she did think it silly), she refused to take the old man at his word that the *s* of the second word was silent. Why put it on there if you're not supposed to say it, she argued. In a matter of days it was she who suggested they play "meel bornes" every night after supper, and looked forward to the obvious pleasure the old man got when he could toss that special card on the table that let him collect an additional three hundred points and declare: *Coup Fourre!* The game was about driving, which she'd never done, so it made sense that the old man, who told her he'd once been a school bus driver for a year, always won. It was just as well she never got to toss that special card herself, since she'd never have been able to say that crazy French phrase.

It was during one of their nightly card games when the old man let it slip that he had a sister. She could see by the surprise on his face that he hadn't meant to tell her, and since he changed the subject to things like the weather every time she brought it up, she was careful about not asking him too much about her.

But for the next week or so, she fancied herself quite the Jessica Fletcher (if her hair was shorter and she a bit older, she could actually see herself as a Latina Angela Lansbury). The little bit of information she got out of him included the old man's much younger sister's name and that she lived only blocks away and was still mighty miffed at him for chasing off the loser that she'd thought was the love of her life. The woman couldn't imagine having a sister she didn't regularly see and talk to all the time, several times a day even. Without considering that a reunion might

mean the old man would leave her for his sister, she asked the sullen teenaged son of the owner of the dry cleaners if he might find the sister's telephone number on his computer. After several days of working up the gumption to call her, she did. She pictured the three of them eating supper at her card table, playing cards, watching TV. She laughed when she thought about him coughing and looking the other way when one of the commercials for Viagra or Tampax came on, but maybe it's not the same when it's your sister watching it with you. She imagined the old man and his sister eternally grateful that she'd put them together again, like the family they were supposed to be, only now one that included her too. The sister answered the phone and admitted the old man was her brother, but said he'd ruined her life and she wanted nothing to do with him and asked the woman to never call again before abruptly hanging up. That was the end of that.

Other than the one time he accidentally mentioned the sister, the old man denied having any other family. "You and I are birds of a feather," he said with a funny southern accent, "doin' just fine on our own, not hurtin' nobody, thanks very much for askin'." Because he never mentioned any friends either, the woman wondered who'd been his Mille Bornes partner. He claimed to remember the game from childhood; his father had taught him and his sister how to play when they were little, and he said he'd found the deck when he was rummaging through a bag of clothes someone had dumped behind the bus stop where she'd found him. It was an answer she didn't readily buy because she couldn't quite believe that someone could remember how to pronounce those fancy French words from when they were kids, and she should know since she had a hard enough time with some Spanish words, and her mother used plenty of them when she was growing up. "I suppose you had some fancy French maid when you were growing up and you wore those cute little French clothes and all," she suggested, but he just laughed and

said she had quite an imagination and that he figured his upbringing wasn't all that different than hers. "It was if you had a father and you got to play French card games," she'd said, and he just shook his head and pretended that he was interested in some pigeon flapping around outside the window.

In bits of conversation over time, the woman learned that after he'd spent all his savings from his days as a barber, his kindly landlord who let him stay far longer than he had to, told him he had no choice but to evict the old man from his apartment. He never mentioned he was sick, but she noticed that sometimes he had trouble breathing and he had to stop every few steps when climbing the stairs. There were nights when she'd get home, and they'd eat ramen noodles out of those little plastic bowls you add boiling water to, or tuna with saltine crackers, because he hadn't cooked anything, but she didn't want him to feel bad, so never asked him why. When she told him he didn't quite look himself one evening, he answered that maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, and they shared a little laugh, even though she figured he must have known—him being a barber and standing in front of a mirror all day long and all—that he wasn't half-bad looking, especially for an old man, though that was an opinion she kept to herself.

The woman always asked the old man if he'd like to walk to church with her on Sunday mornings, even though he declined the offer every time she made it, and even though she wasn't one of those born-again who believed churchgoers were obliged to convert those who weren't. The last time she asked it, was a frigid morning, which reminded her that the heater needed adjusting, and which made her pause and momentarily reconsider the idea of going to church herself. He was sitting at their little kitchen card table as usual—he was always up before she was and always ready with the words he said was a quote from Hemingway: "Why do old men

wake so early? Is it to have one longer day?” As she expected, his fingers were wrapped around a cup of coffee, but this morning he looked at her longer than normal, like he was considering her church offer. “That’s all right,” he said, after a long minute. “Not so sure about the power of prayer myself, but if you feel like saying one for me, it might not be the worst thing in the world.” And she did say a little prayer for him that morning; a prayer that included his sister and that might have mentioned the hope or dream—or would you call it a fantasy?—that they could all become a little family someday soon. When church was over she decided to surprise the old man and stopped and bought cannoli at the Italian deli two blocks down, which, given how freezing cold it was that day, seemed even farther than that. She figured, even though she had no reason to know it, that they were likely his favorite and that maybe after they ate them, she might ask him or he might offer to have a look at her heater.

“I bet these are what you were really praying for,” she said, balancing the small grease-splotched pink box as she closed the door behind her. She was surprised when she stepped in that he was not the first thing she saw sitting on the couch reading his book. He was still sitting at the tiny table, his long fingers still locked around the chipped cup, and his head slumped against his chest. The woman flopped in the chair across from him, begged him to wake up, told him she was sure she could help make his sister understand he’d only been trying to protect her, offered to take over the cooking until he felt better, asked if he needed a little fresh air, and realized that he was dead as a doornail. She took the cup from his hand, took a small sip of the cold coffee, and stared at the pink smear her lipstick left on the rim until her tears stopped coming. For how long she couldn’t say, but it might have been a good long time.

She stayed with him dead in her apartment for the whole rest of that Sunday, not knowing what to do, and bumping up against the quiet with her every move. Sometimes she sat at the table and stared at him, wondering things she'd not managed to get around to asking him, like had he ever had a wife, where'd he learn to cook like that, did he follow his daddy around when he was a little boy, did he get good grades in school, had he ever been to the top of the Empire State Building, and was he mostly happier than he was sad. She thought even crazier thoughts than she ever figured she'd think about a dead person, like did he notice she was wearing the dress he liked and had he ever written a poem. A few times that day she curled up in her bed and pulled the cover over her head, thinking that maybe if she'd just go to sleep for a while, she'd wake up and he would too. She turned the television on and flipped through the channels and wriggled the rabbit ears and turned it off again because she couldn't think with it on, even though she wasn't thinking too good with all the quiet when it was off.

Around suppertime she put her coat on and went down to the pay phone across from the building and put a quarter in the slot and dialed the number of the old man's sister that she'd written down on a dry-cleaning slip. She let it ring ten times before she put the receiver down and got her quarter back and accidentally dropped it on the sidewalk and stood and watched it roll into the street. She stumbled off the curb after it and felt the whirl of a passing bus blow her hair. There were so many trucks and cars and buses on the street that it seemed they were stacked on top of each other. Horns and squealing brakes mixed together with music and diesel engines into a mashed-up jumble of noise that squeezed her head. A hand grabbed her sleeve and pulled her back to the sidewalk. By the time she turned to see who'd yanked her, there were only people walking away from her against the traffic of the street that had suddenly broken free and was

moving fast. A blaring horn, then a yelling man, drew her attention back to the street, and she crouched down to look between the tires flying past but couldn't see the quarter anywhere. The noise and wind and lights and smells melted together in a big, heavy cloud and squished her so hard from all sides she could barely turn around.

She climbed back up to her apartment and sat on the couch across from him and realized she hadn't eaten anything all day, and even though she wasn't one bit hungry, she ate two of the cannoli, raising them up in little toasts to him between bites. She folded what there was of his clothes and put them and the cards and *The Old Man and the Sea* in his backpack, and as soon as she zipped it up, she unzipped it, took everything out, and put it all back in, in reverse order. When she zipped it for the last time she counted her tears as they slid off her chin onto the side pocket and lost count when she got to somewhere around one hundred and ten.

On Monday morning she put the crocheted afghan she'd bought years before at the thrift store over his shoulders and told him not to worry, that she'd figure things out before long. When her boss at the dry cleaners stood beside her to use the adding machine while she pulled plastic bags over clothes, she asked him what someone who has a dead person in their apartment is supposed to do about it. Go straight to jail, he figured—if not for forever then for quite a long while. The woman was glad that a customer came in before he had the chance to ask her why she wanted to know, and another customer after that, and then one more, so that by the time he was standing beside her again, he'd forgotten all about her question. She hadn't been worried about going to jail. And she'd only been worried for a minute about the building manager getting upset that she had a dead man in her apartment—it wasn't like she was going to have a roommate without permission for very much longer. Really, she worried that she might be responsible for

paying to have him buried, and even though he was her best friend in the world, she didn't have that kind of money. She went straight home after work that day and then straight to bed where she stayed for over an hour.

When the battered suitcase was discovered behind the abandoned building weeks later, the building manager told the police he'd seen the old man come and go for a couple of months, but now that they mentioned it, he hadn't seen him in quite some time. The old man seemed like a decent enough guy, he said, quiet and shy, just like the woman. It was the building manager who'd told the police what time to expect her home from work, and they didn't have to wait long. After she told them their story—hers and the old man's—they had a few more questions. When they asked how she got the heavy suitcase down the stairs and to a building two blocks away, she told them that she'd dragged it backward down the stairs, one step at a time, and then borrowed a dolly from the bodega around the corner to pull it to the abandoned building. Once she got it behind the building, she sat down next to the suitcase for hours and said a few prayers. “Why there?” they wanted to know.

“I know the place,” she said. “I grew up there. I used to go back there and sit under a tree, to think and get away from things by myself when I was a girl sometimes. It seemed even more quiet and private with no one living there anymore. Like he might be able to rest in peace there.”

“Got it all the way there and nobody saw you?”

“Come to think of it,” she said, when a neighbor from two floors down heard the ruckus and asked if she needed help, she'd said, “No, that's okay. I got him.”

