Remembering the Dead

A Short Story by Claire Rothman

Maude sits alone, completely clothed in black and sipping wine. The wine is white. Yellow really, from green grapes, but called white. Warm and sour going down. Warm as summer, making her head light and swimmy.

She sits on a deserted terrace, elbows on cold marble. It’s November although you’d never know it. A pale sun washes the streets. It has been so soft this year, caressing, lulling her. Her favourite season in Montreal. Usually filled with violent shifts, strong winds. This one so gentle, golden all through October, November, and gentle.

Maude squints into the sun. A group of people are standing in a park, underneath a bronze angel. The angel hovers above a soldi er, green hand upon his cheek. A microphone squeals and wind and brought to Maude across the street. It has been so soft this year,Usually filled with violent shifts, strong winds. This one so gentle, golden all through October, November, and gentle.

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Maude’s face is pale as a moon ringed with a rust halo of hair. He does not kiss her but as he sits down, reaches under the table. Warm stroke on her thigh. He smiles, eyes shifting quickly from her, and introduces the friend.

Arnold has greased, half-yellow hair. Longish. Stained fingers and teeth, small filmy irises. He is a columnist for an English daily and might be in his sixties. Arnold lights a cigarette and even before it burns down is lighting another.

Maude is glad they are on a terrace. The smoke drifts aimlessly and spills onto the street. Their words scatter with the smoke. Scatter like so much seed or dust. She must not think of it. Her breasts are swollen, tender, full and ripe as autumn.

The mayor’s too old now, Bob says. It’s just as well he’s stepping down. A bent old man. Have you seen him lately? Arnold nods his great streaked head. Twenty-nine years in office, Arnold said. Long time for anyone. I bet that’s more years than you’ve been alive, he says to Maude.

Keep talking and you’ll lose me a girlfriend, Bob says and laughs his big, man’s laugh. She’s our side of thirty.

Maude sips at her wine and tilts her head back into the sun. Orange globes swirl on her eyelids and summer slips deep down inside of her. First mouth, then throat, then belly. Bellyful of warmth. If she kept it she’d swear off drink, swear off bars and blustering men breathing smoke.

More beers. Bob’s colour rises. He’s a Scot who loves his scotch.

He’s a drunk, Bob says. Spineless too. Shifts like a weather vane. Christ you breathe and the man changes direction.

Careless talk. Maude doesn’t know who they’re attacking. Arnold tosses his head, his long teeth grinding peanuts.

Bob loves to talk. When liquor’s in his blood he has no shame. He’ll say anything. It cost him his marriage. A job. When they first met, months ago, it had thrilled her. Now she knows it’s not him, not courage, just booze.

Bob speaks French when he’s drunk. It forks his tongue and turns him loose and wild. All French except for the wife who was a Scot, like him, and a lousy cook. But the mistresses are French. Bob the hedonist. French women, French food. Loves and eats.

His family is grown now. The children are scattered here and there. English kids are like that. Catch onto any wind that
blows through the city; touch down in Toronto, New York, wherever. That’s where they are. The wife left to marry a dentist. The youngest is with her. One child settled in Toronto. Another, an actor, is in New York. Maude has never met any of them. She just hears their voices when they call, and she’s seen photographs of children posing in a park.

Bob never speaks about his children. Once he said he should have stayed a bachelor.

Montreal’s an old whore, Arnold says. A speck of nut flies from his lip onto the table. A warm old whore that everyone loves. No matter who runs her she’ll always be the same.

What would you know about whores? Bob says, laughing.

Maude breathes. Her breasts shift slightly, heavy on her chest. She has never felt so full. She thinks of seed pods, milkweed pushing to burst. Brown husks with white spidery fibres inside. Silk hiding seed, exploding silently in fields. She wants to see it grow, this fullness in her belly.

The city runs itself, Arnold says, and wipes froth from his fine lip hairs. Has for years, he continues. Men just like to flatter themselves they have a say.

Maude’s eyes meet Arnold’s. His words are wise. Too bad about his looks. Take this so-called new government, Arnold says. New men with so-called new ideas. Just watch and see in ten years if anything has changed.

But things do change! Maude thinks. They do. She never would have thought she’d feel it so strongly. Before, when she was young, she’d loved carelessly; so many men. And once before, when she was twenty, this thing had happened. It had been in summer with that boy Germain. When she’d told him he had cried and cried, spilling tears. She’d had to hold him one entire night. She’d been strong then and determined. Then it was nothing. She hadn’t wanted it. Simple as burning off a wart.

Hey, Bob says to her. You still there? You still with us? Maude nods and stares at her black lap.

She is thirty-three now. Thirteen years since the last time. Unlucky. Strange how this would pain her. She could feel it already. Like ripping out part of herself. Killing herself. Bob wouldn’t cry. No. He wouldn’t even want to know.

The sun is dropping. Long shadows fall across the street, striping it in black. A mess of bottles clutters the table. Saucers spill ash and broken butts. Bob tries to light a cigarette in the wind. Fails.

Jeez, Bob says. Can’t even light a goddamn cigarette. He is drunk. It’s late, he says. Let’s go. He puts dollars under a saucer and Arnold slips a large bill under a glass. They get up unsteadily and navigate through the tables, Bob clutching at the backs of chairs. Maude follows him. He is an athletic man and by the time they reach the street, is walking fine.

Hey you, Bob says, slipping his arm around her shoulders. You’re a beauty when you’re glum. Arnold looks away.

They walk up the middle of a deserted street, three abreast, little Maude all in black flanked by two tall, white-haired men.

At the traffic light they stop. All three together, as if choreographed. There are no cars, but they are creatures of the city, creatures of habit. Maude looks down into a sewer. In the garbage and the leaves a fleck of red catches her eye. It is a poppy stuck in the grating; its pin and black centre fallen off, lying there, scarlet, bright as blood.

The Ride

A Short Story by Chris Wind

Dear Sister—

How I wish it was you lived closer to Coventry! It has been less than a fortnight since our last visit, but so much has happened — that I must tell you — Do you remember that discussion we had, prompted by my journey through Mercia?

Well, as soon as I returned, I talked to Leofric about the absolute necessity — moral and economic — of lowering the taxes. I described to him everything I had seen just as I described it to you: the bordars and cottars living in poverty on their little piece of land, in their thatched wooden huts without any comforts; their meagre clothing, that we are a country of wool producers and traders, boasting the finest weavers guild, and yet the people of the land are so poorly clothed; and their