

Scarltanua

by Shelagh Power-Chopra

When she was old, her hair gradually thinning and her legs drifting into a bland numbness, she would sit on her porch and swing in the rusted metal rocker, thinking of nothing but dust and lost love, grief and absolution. Her husband of twenty years was dead, last month they set his body on fire, then tossed his ashes over a nearby river. She herself had a diseased lung, a rude cough in the morning along with her milky, sweet tea.

She slept alone and wept alone these days, the hospital visits more frequent, empty glasses with the residue of gin more apt to rest in her hand. Her son, a temperamental but selfless boy came to her home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, drove her to the hospital, his thin arm guiding the steering wheel with ease. Today it was Thursday.

"You should get out more often, mom, you've got money, take a trip," he'd say each visit, suggesting tours of ancient castles, sailing in the blue seas of the Caribbean.

"I'm an old woman; I can't roam the earth anymore."

"Of course you can, Dammit Mom, why people your age travel constantly." He pressed the gas pedal with surety, hitting the brake lightly at a stop sign.

"I don't want to go anywhere, I'm dying, Thomas." She spoke with authority, her body rigid on the seat.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard, Isn't that the point of going to the hospital, to prolong your life?"

"Nah, you know I'd skip the hospital but you kids would scream at me, let the lady live! I'd rather go to sleep and never wake up. Remember that tribe your grandfather studied? The Orknokeys or something sounding like that? He told me once he had been invited to some sort of ritual, a festive occasion. Everyone was very happy, very cheery, dancing about and drinking this smoky white liquid made from turnips that your grandpa become quite fond of, I remember he managed to smuggle some home in a jar and it

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smelled like burnt hair. Anyway, he danced wildly himself, he told me, ran around and went crazy with some old women. They were all draped in skins and strings of shells, their hair tied up with dried strips of tree bark. One of them died right there in his arms, a real beast of a woman with giant loose breasts, she fell, literally right on top of him. Two huge men had to lift her off. Grandpa was okay but his health faltered after that, he claimed his organs had shrunk, had diminished, squashed so to say.

The point is of course, was the reaction of the group, they simply put her in the corner, lay some banana leaves over her and continued with the party, it was that simple. The next morning Grandpa said the body was gone, no one explained to him the situation, when he asked about her they all simply said, “Scarltanua”. What that meant he couldn't figure out. He never really found out until years later he was reading one of those anthropology magazines and he came across the word again, described by another anthropologist who studied a branch of the same tribe, a distant kin or such but in a different region. He hypothesized that “Scarltanua” meant accidental death by a heavy person or animal, a natural-dignified death put to rest easily. Grandpa was that large animal. “

“That's weird, mom, grandpa was weird.” He shot his mother a look of contempt.

“That's not the point, son, I want a *Scarltanua*. Not to say, I'd like a large animal to maul me, I just don't want the hoo-ha. Throw me in the ground or burn me up, that's all, no grieving.”

