

AND THAT'S WHEN I REMEMBERED

The water spins in circles, spiralling down the drain after I've finished washing my hands. The cold water reminds me of a memory from long ago. I turn off the tap and dry my hands, catching sight of the time. *Eya!* It was already after five.

I turn up the volume on the television, as the monotonous roar of the neighbour's lawnmower is drowning out the voice of the newscaster.

"New South Wales Health has confirmed three cases of the deadly coronavirus, bringing the national number to four."

I shake my head and click my tongue. *Eq! The media, always trying to scare people. Just like my Josie tells me.*

I pick up my crochet and look at the pattern, trying to remember where I was up to. Three double crochets, two half trebles... I nearly drop the hook when a sudden, shrill beeping pierces my ears. *What the bloody hell is going on?*

The infuriating sound leads me into the kitchen, and I curse under my breath. *Joe! You left your coffee pot on the stove.* I quickly shuffle across the kitchen and turn it off. I reach for the pot, but the handle is scalding hot and already beginning to melt.

I rub my hand, feeling the warm gold of my wedding band. That's when I remember. Joe is gone - long gone now. What has it been? Five, six years?

Ah, but we had a good life together. Forty-six years of marriage. They hadn't all been easy; just as in life, marriage has its ups and downs. I look down at the coffee pot, and that's when I remember.

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I crept down the hall, careful to avoid spots that creak, knowledge you learn after walking up and down the same floors for over forty years. The bedroom door would give me away, Joe was always forgetting to oil it, but the surprise I had in store would be ready for Joe by that time.

"Happy Father's Day." I sang as I walked carefully to the bed and set down the heavy tray of coffee and toast, Joe's favourite.

He turned, rolling over. He smiled lazily; his eyes still puffy from sleep.

"Maria, our children are all grown-up. When are you going to stop fussing over me for Father's Day?"

I waved my hand, brushing him off. The day he became the father of my girls was the most important day of our lives. I would celebrate that day even if I were no longer blessed to have him by my side.

“*Tomato paste, parmesan, eggs....*” I read off the items on my shopping list as I move through the aisles. The trolley seems to have a mind of its own and keeps veering to the right, but I am stronger than I look, and I force it to comply.

As I drag the uncooperative trolley to the last lane, my eyes scan almost entirely empty shelves before landing at the very end. I scuffle over, picking up the last remaining two-pack of toilet paper. Its packaging is torn, but I’m all out, so it will have to do.

I load my shopping onto the conveyer belt, trying to avoid the sticky something that leaves a trail from the customer before me. I dig around inside my handbag, but I can’t find my purse.

“Oi, lady, do you mind? We haven’t got all day.”

I apologise and try to explain, but she cuts me off.

“Get out of the line then.” She says, her nasal accent making it difficult for me to understand her.

I look at the check-out girl. She chews her lip and shrugs, “We can put your shopping aside until you come back?” She offers.

“Nah, Nah-Nah. No holds.” The woman moves her trolley towards me, forcing me to back out of the lane before she grabs the toilet paper off the top of my shopping bag and sets it down on top of the conveyer belt, right into the sticky something.

The walk home is six blocks, only three bus stops away. After one block, it begins to rain. After the third block, my clothes are soaked through. After the fourth block, my teeth are chattering, and I’m cursing myself for forgetting not only my purse but my umbrella as well.

“Excuse me, Ma’am. Do you need some help?”

A firm voice alarms me, and I spin around, nearly tripping, but I catch myself before I fall.

“Whoa there. You’re alright.” He calls out from the inside of his car, but I can’t understand what he’s saying.

“What do you want?” I ask him, but his eyebrows draw together, and he looks at his partner. They’re policemen; I recognise their car and their uniforms.

Have I done something wrong? Have I forgotten to pay for something again?

“You speak Maltese?” The partner asks, and I nod quickly.

Thank God, I mentally cross myself.

“I’m Constable Micallef, this is Constable Phelps. You’re not in any trouble. We just want to get you out of this rain. Where are you going?”

I look down the road but realise I’ve forgotten. I look back at the policemen, and they look at each other.

“Hop in. We’ll work it out.”

It’s finally stopped raining when Constable Micallef drives me home. As we pull into the driveway, I frown at the overgrown lawn and the roses that need a good prune.

Constable Micallef helps me to the front door. He’s such a good boy, his parents came from Gżira like I did.

I step over the threshold, and the wind picks up, gently blowing the chimes that hang on the veranda, and that’s when I remember.

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Joe swung me into his arms, causing peals of laughter to erupt from the girls like wind chimes on the breeze.

He carried me over the threshold, his wide smile full of pride. For six years, we’d saved every cent of my pay to buy our first house. It wasn’t much, but it was better than living in the flat above my mother’s friend Tony and his wife’s garage.

The girls ran through the house, searching for their new bedrooms. Boxes were stacked along the walls, narrowing the pathways like a maze.

Joe set me down, and we held hands. We didn’t need to go far; our bedroom was the first on the right. It was Joe’s favourite because he could protect the family from intruders, it was my favourite because I could look out over the roses in the garden.

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Yellow roses line the pathway that leads to my new home. *Eq!* It’s not a home. It’s a room with a kitchenette and a bathroom smaller than my wardrobe back at home, at my *real* home.

“The garden’s nice, Ma.” Mary says, trying to smile.

I nod my head and sigh.

Her husband won’t have to mow my lawn anymore.

“What’s wrong, Ma?” She asks, settings down a cup of tea on the table by my chair.

I sniff at it. She always makes it too strong.

“I don’t like it here. It smells funny. Why can’t I live with you or Josie? I could look after the babies.”

“Ma, we talked about this. We’re at work all day, and you wander off. At least here, you can’t get lost, you don’t have to worry about going to the shops. It’s all taken care of for you.”

“*Eya*, I like to go to the shops. I like to go for walks. I’m trapped here. I don’t like it.”

Mary tries to change the subject, to point out all the things I no longer have to worry about, but she’s speaking English, and it gives me a headache.

“You ungrateful child. You just want to get rid of me. After everything we have done for you and your sister. We should never have had children. Your father spoilt you rotten. Get out! I don’t want you here! Leave!”

She doesn’t leave, so I keep yelling until she’s going, her face red with tears. Her Maltese isn’t good enough to know what I’m saying, how ugly my words are. She doesn’t know those nasty words. We never taught them to her.

I look over at the cold cup of tea on my table, two biscuits on the saucer. Next to it is a picture frame, a photo of Joe holding Mary, with little Josie by his side, looking at her new sister. That’s when I remember.

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“God is punishing us.” I cried as I lay on my side with Joe’s arms wrapped tightly around me.

“We sinned, and God is punishing us.” My tissue did nothing to soak up my tears; it was as wet as my cheeks and pillow.

“Ssshh, Maria,” Joe whispered, tightening his hold of me, “God does not punish. He loves all his children. Our babies are with Him now. We will have children when He knows we are ready.” His words echoed what Father Francis told me after I lost my last two babies. My third miscarriage had left me bedridden for a week, too heartbroken to go to church.

Joe was right, of course, and we were blessed with four more pregnancies, two of which gave us our girls.

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The plate put down in front of me contains something I cannot describe as food. I throw the plate across the room, laughing at the mess it makes on the floor. I get up to run away, but my legs are tired, and I can’t leave my chair. A strong hand tightens around my wrist as someone yells at me, and that’s when I remember.

Joe grabbed me by the hand, and we ran from the restaurant. I laughed and screamed at the waiter who chased us, but Joe knocked over chairs and tables, blocking him off and allowing us to escape.

We'd never done anything that crazy before, but when we'd seen that pathetic meal that they were daring to charge so much money for, Joe had looked at me, our eyes locking as we silently agreed it wasn't worth it.

We ran down East Street, shoving aside the crowds of people, turning into a back street behind the church. We took another corner, and I looked behind me, beginning to lose my breath. I swiped my hair out of my eyes and saw we weren't being followed. I pulled on Joe's hand, begging him to stop.

He slowed and pulled me into his arms, pushing me against the stone wall and kissing me, his lips taking away the last of my breath.

"Marry me." He said, not a question, but a demand whispered between breathless kisses.

I couldn't answer. I lifted my hands to Joe's chest, pushing him away and staring into his eyes, seeing my future in their blue depths.

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Masks are everywhere now, and not just masks, 'PPE' they call it. Plastic shields and white overalls that cover them from head to foot. I can't even see their shoes. They come into my room to serve my meals, *eq!*

I watch them go and turn on the radio, scrolling through the stations until there's one playing a song I recognise, and that's when I remember.

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In the shoe factory where I worked, the radio was always playing. The boss liked to listen to it, and I think it made us work faster, too. The upbeat songs set a springy beat that our hands managed to keep up with.

It was September 1942, and we were behind our quota for the month, with too many interruptions, too many shortages. The song on the radio cut off abruptly and was replaced with yet another air raid alert, and the church bells began to toll. I sighed as the other workers and I put down our work and headed for the basement. We were lucky; many of the factories didn't have a shelter.

We'd run out of biscuits, but we shared cups of weak tea while we waited, the walls and roof above us shaking now and then. But it was quickly over, and we went back to work.

I made my way home at the end of my shift, avoiding the debris strewn across the cobbled streets. The soles of my shoes were paper-thin, and any tiny pebble caused me to hiss in pain.

I turned the last corner before my street, but Triq Il-Karmnu was gone. A few walls and chimneys stood sentry, dust and smoke rising from the debris they watched over.

I scrambled forward, clambering over bricks and furniture and things I knew were once people. My stockings were ruined, my bloody knees and hands scraped after many tumbles as I raced to the house I shared with my mother and my brothers. *Please, God, let them be safe.*

The chaos of the street ended as abruptly as it began. A destroyed house lay crumpled beside a sound and solid one. I crossed myself three times, wishing I had my rosary. Three houses down, my house stood whole, untouched, and victorious against those awful Nazis.

I ran into the house and into my mother's arms, crying with relief as my little brothers joined us, rubbing their tear-stained faces in the folds of my skirt.

We drank our tea in silence before we headed out into the street.

"God would want us to help others." My mother said.

The smoke and dust obscured the light of the setting sun, turning the street a murky amber. We offered tea to our neighbours who stood in the street, their tears still flowing as they sipped and thanked us for our kindness.

"Maria!" My brother yelled.

"What?" I yelled back, "What are you doing? Get away from there! You'll get hurt!"

He ran to me and tugged on my elbow, almost knocking the pot of tea out of my grasp.

My mother shrugged, and I set down the pot on her tray, letting myself be dragged towards the wreckage.

As we drew closer, my eyes widened at what my brother was so desperate to show me. A foot lay amongst bricks and crushed rock, a slipper abandoned beside it. I tried to pull my brother away.

"No, Maria. Wait."

Sure enough, the big toe wiggled.

"Help!" I yelled, "Someone help me! Someone's alive here."

Five or six neighbours rushed over, and we threw aside the rubble, digging out a man in his pyjamas.

A small crowd had gathered to watch, and there was a cheer as we lifted him out of the debris that was once his home.

"Am I dead?" The man asked.

“No, sir. You’re alive.” I replied, but he shook his head.

“No, I must be dead.” He said, “Because surely, you are an angel.” I laughed and looked into his blue eyes.

“I’m no angel, sir. I’m just Maria.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Maria. I’m Joe.”

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What the people on the news call the ‘Second Wave’ has taken many of the residents in the home. We are no longer allowed to leave our rooms; no visitors can come. But one of the new nurses speaks Maltese, and she tells me what’s happening.

I haven’t been here very long, so I didn’t get a chance to know them well, but I pray for them and for their families. I think to myself that I might be taken too. Death creeps along the corridors, snaking its way under the door. At night I close my eyes, and I wonder, will I wake up tomorrow?

Each day that I wake up, I ask the nurse, who was taken that night? And she tells me.

She tells me their names, and that’s when I remember.

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I came home from school and began making supper. My mother was at the hospital, and she needed me to look after the house while she was visiting my father.

I stirred the pot of beans and heard the front door open and close.

“How was he today?” I called out, but she didn’t answer.

I wiped my hands on my apron and turned around. My mother came into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Do you think I could finish school early tomorrow, so I can come with you?”

She looked up, and I saw the redness in her eyes and the rosary clutched in her fingers. I reached for her hands, the warm beads digging into my palm. We said the Lord’s prayer together, my eyes tightly closed as my tears spilled down onto the floral tablecloth.

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I lie in bed, the warm beads of my rosary tucked into my hand. I cough, but the cough does nothing, and it's getting harder to breathe. Each inhale seems to fill my chest with mud-like spittle.

Two women come to visit me, they have beautiful eyes that remind me of someone, but I can't remember who. They say the Lord's prayer over me, and I try to comfort them when they start crying but trying to speak only makes me cough.

I stop coughing. My body is too tired. I can feel my lungs filling up with salt water, and that's when I remember.

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My father was a mischievous man who liked to play pranks. One summer, when I was little, he threw me into Saint Peter's pool. He'd done it many times before, so there was no reason for alarm, but that time there was a fishing net hidden beneath the surface. My foot became trapped, and I was too little, my legs too weak to pull free.

I was struggled beneath the cold water for a long time, but I wasn't afraid. My father dove into the sea; his strong arms broke the water above me in a blinding crash. He freed my foot and swam me towards the surface, back up into the light.