

Love's Last Service

a timed exercise

by Francesca Ryan

She glowered at her.

Sally said nothing. The old woman sighed, and her face softened a little as Sally took off her shawl and wiped her eyes.

“He's in the parlour.”

Mrs Broughton lifted her hand, gesturing towards the large oak cupboard in the corner. The one that many generations of women had dusted and polished over the long years of marriage. Not a speck of dust in that kitchen. The old woman's cracked red fingers spoke of a lifetime's war against grime. A battleground, where the domestic foot soldier fought against the might of an ever-renewing enemy. To Mrs Broughton's mind, her daughter-in-law lacked sufficient zeal for the fight in her own cramped home. No, Mrs Broughton was a seasoned veteran. Who could have told her about the resilience needed for the grinding campaign.

Sally never acknowledged this chain of command. Hardly a new recruit. She had learned from her own mother, who had learned from her mother before that. Still, something in Sally jibbed against the servitude. Small act of rebellion, the jar daffodils on her kitchen windowsill, a book. A fondness for daydreaming, an occasional tardiness in getting her brood ready for church. Her mother-in-law noted all of this in her ledger. The accounts spoke for themselves. Her son had been too tolerant with his wayward wife. Mrs Broughton's lips compressed in pain and anger. He had deserved better. But here they were.

Sally pulled the bottom drawer open and stopped. Her breath caught in her throat.

“I can't.”

Mrs Broughton pushed her aside. She pulled out the clean white shirt. Slightly musty, a yellowing patch on the sleeve from storage. But it was clean and pressed. When the tin bath of water heated from the copper was full, they began, carefully and in silence. They sponged the cold dust from his dead body. Face first, then hands. Inch by inch, pale flesh gleamed beneath their labour. Mrs Broughton's tenderness was thorough.

Sally's pain caught in her throat as she sponged his back, as she wrung the scrap of towel between her hands. Hands that had caressed him in joy, struck him in anger once, and now performed the last service she could.

The bent heads of the women concentrated methodically on the task. He would go to their church clean and in good linen, to meet his Lord. Sally suddenly choked and stepped away.

“Sit down.”

The older woman gestured to the small pine stool in the corner. She'd finish this herself. A grim satisfaction came over her. He is mine again. Finally. When it was finished, the filthy cloths left in the sink to soak, she stepped over to Sally and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Fetch the shirt, lass.”

Sally rose, washed her hands and returned with the white bundle. Red eyes downcast as she handed it over.

“Come on now. It will take the both of us.”

They lifted his right arm, Sally behind. They pushed the limb down into the sleeve of the funeral garment. The women's lips moved in bitter silent prayer, as they lifted the body of their beloved into place.