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*The Mirror*

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**THE MIRROR**

**by**

**Andras Totisz**

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It was a Wednesday when the Lady-Who-Couldn't-Grow-Old entered Sylvia's office. It must have been a Wednesday, because just then Sylvia Fox was thinking about making love that night. Involuntarily, her long thighs moved slightly. Outside, on the street, spring was raving. The trees looking through school windows whispered about love to daydreaming girls, and a sweet anxiety vibrating the air made men read promises from the girls' eyes.

Sylvia Fox, drinking her second cup of coffee, tipped the high-backed office chair toward the window, and read in the office building on the other side of the street a tale about love. She felt that she would like to strangle Robert, her husband, for always making love on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

That was the moment when the Lady-Who-Couldn't-Grow-Old entered. At first sight she looked like an average little old lady. Her hair was gray, her face, once beautiful, had been slashed to tiny pieces by wrinkles. She had a small handbag, out of fashion, similar to the one that Sylvia got for her tenth birthday from Aunt Amalie. She sat down on the other side of the modern, but impractical writing desk, placed her old-fashioned handbag in her lap, and bent so far forward that Sylvia was glad for the fact of the desk between them.

"I called you earlier," she announced.

"Mrs. Protter?" Sylvia looked into the pale blue eyes. She had talked a good five minutes with Mrs. Protter when she called, referring to a mutual acquaintance, a former client. But Sylvia still didn't understand what this was all about.

"You want a divorce, do you, Mrs. Protter?"

"Me? I should not dream of doing so. I want a court to declare officially that this man who now lives with me, is not the same Henry Protter I married forty-seven years ago."

Sylvia Fox was twenty-eight years old. The year she was born, this nervous little woman had been living with Henry Protter—or somebody else—for nineteen years. Sylvia was a practicing lawyer for three years now and had never dealt with a real nutcase before. Maybe the time had come.

Mrs. Protter straightened up, grasped her bag as if she were afraid of losing it, and looked at Sylvia like a curious bird.

"Ah... How do you mean he is not the same?" Sylvia asked uncertainly.

The little bird fluffed its feathers. The small, shining eyes glared up into Sylvia's face, almost making her laugh out loud. It was a sad sight, though, somehow reminding her of Aunt Grace's canary, a few minutes before Uncle Bob accidentally stepped on it on the Persian rug and trampled it to death.

"He is another man," said Mrs. Protter in a firm voice. "His name is the same, he was born on the same day and has the same mother, but he is somebody else."

"How do you mean?"

Mrs. Protter reached into her handbag and took out some photos. She didn't have to search for them. The old hand glided into the required partition of the outdated bag, and emerged with the photos a few seconds later as if it had eyes and a mind of its own.

The first picture was an old black-and-white snapshot with perforated edges. A young man smiled into the camera. Light flannel pants streaming in the wind, short-sleeved white shirt, unbuttoned light-colored vest. He stood with both hands in his pocket, the jacket beside him, casually thrown onto the beached sailboat. The sea behind him looked alive: chilly, clear and unfriendly. The sand was virginal; it had probably been defiled by hundreds of thousands since then.

"He was handsome," said Sylvia cautiously.

"Wasn't he?" There was something now in Mrs. Protter, which embarrassed Sylvia. Something feminine, an almost girlish femininity. Sylvia cast down her eyes.

The second picture slowly glided into her field of vision. She took it obediently. It was the usual Polaroid photo, lacking depth. A living room with a tasteless mixture of furniture—some inherited from earlier generations, the rest acquired during a long line of years. There was a Christmas tree in one corner with an old man standing beside it. He was lean, a little bent, and looked like a professor with his checkered coat and thick, framed glasses.

Sylvia slowly put down the picture. She felt a moment of dizziness, as if nature were playing a strange game with her, taking her forty years into the future. She saw herself grow old, saw the armchairs she bought last year not as gaining vintage with the passage of time, but becoming unmarketable instead, and saw Robert too. Saw him reading his paper; saw him sitting in front of the TV set; saw him in her mind: eating a burger; trout fishing; and saw him growing old too, saw him nurse her if the need arose. The only thing she couldn't visualize him doing was making love. No amount of magic could make her see him bent over her, sweating, with passion burning in his eyes, and a desire which could make her feel a woman.

She hated Mrs. Protter for this.

"He grew old," Sylvia said. "Almost fifty years passed between the time these two pictures were taken, and your husband has grown old."

"Why?" Mrs. Protter asked, and Sylvia Fox somehow knew that she was not referring to narrow arteries, ulcers, wrinkles, or sagged skin.

"Why has he grown old? I married a young man."

But Sylvia was barely listening to her now. She was toying with an evil little scheme, which had formed in her mind, while listening to Mrs. Protter's voice. A scheme capable of punishing this birdlike creature, for she had forced Sylvia to realize that Robert was slowly growing old beside her.

“My Henry brought me flowers every week. This guy, who resembles him, has the date of my birthday and our wedding anniversary noted in his calendar. That proves again that he couldn’t possibly be the same man. My Henry would remember.”

Every word was a slap in Sylvia’s face and she knew that she would repay every one of them in kind.

“Henry used to be cheerful, a true Bohemian. One day he sprang up. “We are going to Vegas,” he said. I protested to no purpose. By the time I realized he wasn’t joking, he had packed a small suitcase and called a cab.

Sylvia looked at the two photos. The old Henry listened disapprovingly to the tale. The other, the good-looking, young adventurer in the old picture smiled mysteriously.

Robert once took Sylvia to Mexico as suddenly. It happened before an exam. Sylvia told him that he was out of his mind. They spent three unbelievable days in Tijuana. Now she felt like it had happened to somebody else. Maybe it had been another couple. Maybe she had seen this scene in a movie...

Mrs. Protter was no longer talking to Sylvia, but to herself, mumbling, indulging in her reveries. About the other Henry, who hadn’t called her an old cockatoo, but used to say that every orgasm was a thousand-year orgasm that shone in her eyes. Who used to dance better than Fred Astair, who could have won every woman’s heart, with whom every single date was an adventure, every single day—a miracle.

“Mrs. Protter. Could you show me some photos of yourself, too?”

Sylvia Fox bent a little closer to see the wrinkled face better. A flock of birds rose nervously outside the window. The sun gleamed on the surface of the office building opposite and its ugly tower shone. Henry, the impersonator, the one who had usurped his name, was sitting now at home. Robert, the new man, who sometimes still resembled the real one, was in his office, ten blocks and a whole world away. In between two transactions, he may well have been thinking about their lovemaking that evening.

Mrs. Protter dug into her bag. The old hand disappeared and reappeared.

She handed over the older picture first. It was probably taken the same time when the one of Henry was, beside the sailboat. It showed a slim young girl in a long skirt, her silken shirt sticking to her pert little breasts in the wind. There was a silk shawl around her neck, which Sylvia somehow knew had to be red, and a pert little hat sat on her head.

A thousand-year orgasm shone in her eyes. The smile of a woman who is in love and knows that she is loved.

“You were beautiful,” said Sylvia quietly. She began to regret what she was planning to do. But she put the other picture beside the older one. The over-colored Polaroid’s redness looked like a wound on her desk. It was taken at the same party where the old man impersonating Henry was photographed. The same Christmas tree in the background, and the same furniture, worn to boredom. And in the focus there was an old woman clad in over-bright clothes. Sylvia prepared to break Mrs. Protter.

“Look”, she said and turned the two pictures toward the old woman. “You grew old along with Henry.”

There was a moment of silence. The bright bird-eyes clung to the two pictures. Small wrinkles appeared above the nose, sharpened by age into a beak. The silence lingered. In the outside world the schoolgirls, who had heard the trees’ rustle through the window and had understood their meaning, entrusted their messages to the wind for some lucky men. Robert was drinking his coffee from an enormous mug, bending closer to the monitor from time to time. He ought to wear glasses, but his vanity didn’t permit him.

Mrs. Protter looked up. “Do you really think so?”

She pushed back the picture in front of Sylvia and something strange happened. The picture remained the same, but it changed somehow. Now, a radiant young girl stood gloriously in front of the camera. Sylvia could still see the sagged muscles, the wrinkles, they had not disappeared, but it looked as if a second layer had emerged, by command of an invisible developer. This young girl craved love and compliments. Craved long walks with her lover in the night and sitting on a bench way past midnight, the warmth of his overcoat put around her bare shoulders.

When the Lady-Who-Couldn’t-Grow-Old had left, Sylvia considered calling Robert for quite some time. Then she went instead to the lavatory, closed the door behind her and stood before the mirror. She looked at the thick, russet hair, the sensual line of the shoulders, the exciting skin coming into sight from under the blouse. She looked at herself in a way a man would, and she felt excited. She was on the verge of shrinking back from what she intended to do. Then she thought of Mrs. Protter and proceeded. She stood in front of the mirror till she could see the minute crow’s feet around her eyes, the initial double chin, the breasts going soft. Until she could see stomach complaints, back pains, recurrent fears before sleep, diets, and sugar-free sweeteners. She could see books unread and plays unwatched. Dates never taking place. She saw lunch next Sunday, visiting Robert’s parents next month. Her new, over-bright outfit. A game of cards at Doris’s house. She saw herself growing old beside Robert. Then she left the mirror and returned to her office.

That evening they made love.

**END**

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