

(This was a timed write, first posted to *The View from the Briarpatch* 15Oct2015)

A Single Difference

By Michael Wayne McDermott

So many ways.

In so many ways, he was just like every other man (boys, mainly, if she was honest with herself and Gawd if ever there was a time to be honest with herself...) she had been with in the six years since Adam died. She never seemed to expect more than any of them had to give and in the end, she neither asked for nor received... enough.

This was not to say she dated monsters or drones, not at all. In fact, she would have been hard pressed to identify a common thread among her failed relationships that she should spotted earlier, that might have prompted an earlier exit and relieved her of the painful, juddering descent. Always and in all ways she was left feeling empty.

Ralph was a good guy. Even today, a full year after she had deleted and blocked him, she had to admit it. A good guy. He got her humor, looked adoring at all the right moments. He remembered her birthday, the solitary one that had fallen within the window of their time together. Polite to her father, complimentary to her mother. In point of fact, there really was no good reason why it didn't work out. But it didn't. And when he wouldn't (couldn't?) accept the truth, she had to convince him and accept herself that even friendship wasn't in the cards.

She remembered the half year with Phil - Philo, but he ha-a-a-ted it - with a crooked grin. He was her intellectual lover, the one with whom she could spend hours dissecting the topic of the moment, pretending to understand Proust and Aquinas and making throwaway references to Great Books that neither of them had ever read all the way through. Phil was off in Minnesota working on his doctorate in philosophy and she occasionally found herself missing the sheer mental exercise of each trying to gain the upper hand in arguments over the issues of the day. Late nights with Phil were the closest she would ever come to manning the barricades in a tragically lost cause. And a lost cause, Phil was.

She glanced at her watch and performed a quick calculation – landed at four, half hour to collect his bag, allow twenty for the taxi queue and maybe thirty-five for the drive...Any minute now.

'Really, this is bordering on the ridiculous,' she thought. 'He's not a superhero, after all. He's a man, he's just a man, and I've had so many.... Okay, enough with the show tunes!'

Chuckling, she thought of Willie. Willie could make anyone laugh; at least, he could always make *her* laugh. And he did, sometimes in the most awkward situations. Like the time she was on the phone with a friend whose cat had died. Willie decided that was prime time to dance naked with the single prop of a spray can of fake whipped cream. (There were sights that simply should not be seen by a woman trying to comfort a bereaved friend on the phone.) Willie would do anything for a smile and that's probably what killed their relationship, truth be told. Never serious. But a good guy. Yup, a really good guy.

They were all *really good guys*, each in his own way and with his own ways about him. But... But she never expected more from them and so, she never got more. You get what you look for, maybe. And each and all of them failed to measure up to the one with whom she had planned to spend her life. And would have, if not for black ice and a moment's inattention. So she had given up looking, settling into a solitary routine in which she felt comfortable if never quite comforted.

And then, he seemed to have just shown up even though they had known each other at a distance for years, in the manner of neighbors who can be counted on to bring in the mail when the other is away without taking the slightest interest in return addresses. Then one day they both returned sweaty from workouts at the same moment and before either of them understood why they had each showered and dressed and were out their adjoining doors together in search of sustenance.

And maybe a bit more, as it turned out.

They became new friends and old friends in the same brief span of moments, a matter of recognition that passed between them unspoken. No one thing led to another. They simply were.

He didn't replace Adam. Neither of them demanded or yielded pieces of their pasts. They became a matched pair seemingly without effort. There was no competition with ghosts or memories as they began to construct their own legend together.

And for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why. Why him? Why this guy?

Once he found out her middle name was Daphne he took to calling her Daffy at odd moments and she hated it but loved him for it. He studied her face while she talked, really studied it like he couldn't get enough of her and couldn't bear the thought of missing the smallest fragment of meaning or intent. He opened doors and walked nearer the curb and cleared the dishes and told her when it was advisable to roll down the car window. Now. Quickly.

Small things. Neither larger nor more remarkable than a hundred things one or more of her previous boyfriends had done. There was truly nothing she could think of that set him above or apart from the others, no one thing that she could put her finger on as the reason she'd spent the whole day glancing at the clock in anticipation of catching sight of him for the first time since he'd kissed her goodbye on Monday.

Well, maybe there was one thing.

She loved him.

And that, after all, was the single difference that made her smile in spite of herself as he stepped through the door and looked around for her.