

A Scottish Arts Club Short Story Competition Finalist

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AS LONG AS IT TAKES

BY SUSAN HAIGH

For Mireille, grief seems like an impossible dream.

Mireille Marie Maupeu knows about planes. If you were to ask her, she'd say she doesn't love planes, or even like them. Not at all. She has a passion for them; that's not the same; not the same at all. Planes fill her head, like bees burrowing into her brain – *that* bit of her brain. Then there's the smell; aviation fuel. That never leaves her, either.

Mireille Marie Maupeu has a job - an important job, she'd say. At the airport, it is, where they call her *Madame*, instead of Mireille. Or, even worse, Mie. She doesn't like people to call her Mie; it's disrespectful, childish, for a woman of her age - fifty-nine next birthday - a woman of her standing. They gave her this job because of her extensive knowledge; she's sure of that now. No, it's not only extensive, it's profound. In the years she has spent studying the skies, the arrivals boards, the gates, the passengers, she has seen everything. When she first came here, just after she'd heard, when it all started, she saw angels descending through mist, wings poised, landing on tip-toe on the runways, carrying messages of hope; but rarely now. More recently, she has seen winged chariots, trailing clouds of fire and foreboding across the skies; and eagles glinting in the sun, wings already spread, ready to soar on the high thermals. She knows their shapes, their colours – Air France, pristine white; the dancer's position of Ryanair; the green – oh, that tasteless, ugly green of Aer Lingus, she can't abide it; the red, white, blue of American Airlines. Mireille has watched; she has asked questions; she has wondered about the magic and mystery; she has tried to understand. How is it that a plane can stay in the sky? And sometimes it doesn't. How? Why? She asks herself that every day. Her brain, *that* bit of her brain, the bit that's full of planes, won't let her think, let her *know*. And what happens to those people, if ...? She shrinks away from the words as they form in her mind, can't let them settle into the shape of her nightmares.

Each morning, at ten o'clock, Mireille Marie Maupeu leaves her post and walks across to the airport bar, where she sits at a table overlooking the runway. She twists her hands, pulls the skin on her wrists this way and that way, then pats her hair and sighs. The waitress smiles; a friendly smile. 'Madame?' She knows how Mireille likes to be addressed. Madame does not look up. An espresso appears in front of her. She doesn't speak, but rummages in her waist-purse for change. Small change is all she has these days. Not like it used to be. She reaches out to drop the coins onto the tray on the table, but a hand on her arm stops her. This time she lifts her head to look at the waitress, who is smiling again and shaking her head. A croissant appears beside the coffee. Mireille lifts the cup to her lips, carefully, with both hands, shaking slightly, her eyes fixed on the runway. She watches as passengers make their way down distant steps and across the tarmac like ants, workers on the march.

For the half-hour of her break, Mireille Marie Maupeu stares out of the window at the highway rolling out into the skyline, as if it, too, might be taking off. She counts the people as they walk towards her. Wonders where they've come from, where they are bound for. Briefly, she sees her reflection in the window and turns her head away; then she gets up and walks back to her post. She sits down in her kiosk, looks up at each customer, smiles expectantly. Some smile back. Sometimes she holds out a small photograph. 'Where have you come from...?', 'Have you ...?' she whispers. Some look confused. Mostly they ignore her. Occasionally, a face will lean down towards hers: 'Madame? Comment?' She doesn't reply. Sometimes, a uniformed hand will rest on her shoulder for a moment, then move on. Coins appear in her saucer as her customers come out and hurry away to their own destinations and destinies.

Mireille keeps her trolley around the back of her block, well out of the sight of passers-by. She likes to keep things neat and that includes her trolley. Neatness is her job. She is proud of her work. Her customers have only the best; warm towels, hand-wash containers always full, each cubicle carefully inspected after use, toilet rolls neatly folded at the end. She looks after her block as if it were her own home.

Later, in the evening, she will make her way to the restaurant, always almost empty by the time she gets there; maybe a few couples, who take no notice of a middle-aged woman sitting alone by the window, always by the window. They won't see her unfold a piece of newspaper and peer at it. They won't see the faded photograph or the headline: *Air France*

plane loses contact over the Andes. A hundred and fifty passengers and six crew members missing. But *she* will remember it, *that day*; the television report, the disbelief, the minutes that refused to pass, her skin turning to ice, her heart racing, out of control; then her husband's numbed stillness, the words that wouldn't come. Days later, more reports – rescuers were searching for the wreckage; then the lists – two lists. First the dead; then the missing. 'Missing'; such a hard word, hard to understand, to take in, a word that seems to have - no end.

Then the years without news. But *she* had to go on, go on living – somehow - for him, for her son. She began to think that maybe, just maybe, somewhere ... Miracles *have* happened; Mireille knows that.

Her husband – now ex-husband - didn't believe in miracles; got tired of hearing her talk about it after six years. Wanted them to be ... *normal* ... again, he said. Took her to a counsellor, who called her Mie – so disrespectful - told her she had to 'work through it', as if it were some kind of job or an exercise in a school text-book. How can you work through something when you don't know what it is you're working through? Told her she had to get past the first 'task'. Said it was denial. How could she get through *that*, never mind all the other so-called 'tasks' he talked about, when there wasn't anything *to* deny? She even had a spell of 'rest' in a clinic; time to reflect, they said.

By the time she got home again, *he* had gone, too, her husband. Left her some cash and a note. Said he was sorry. He couldn't listen any more, couldn't cope.

Then she found this job, the perfect job. And here she is, waiting. Waiting for her son. It doesn't matter how long; she'll wait however long it takes. No-one, *no-one* will ever say she gave up, didn't wait long enough, wanted her life, her mind back.

At twenty-three thirty hours, Mireille Marie Maupeu will take her trolley into her block, checking that everything is there, and close the door behind her. She will turn the key in the lock and take a final look around to see that everything is clean and ready for the morning customers; then she will undress and step into the shower. She will stand under the warm spray and feel – *at home*.

At twenty-three forty-five, she will take her sleeping bag from her trolley – Carrefour, found abandoned in the airport car-park – and carefully spread it on the floor. Then, with equal

care, she will take a parcel wrapped in a towel and remove a frame with a photograph of a young man in Air France uniform. She will place it on top of the cupboard where she keeps her cleaning materials; then she can see him, Mathieu Michel Maupeu, when she wakes up. She will lie down and try to sleep. Of course, what she would really like to do is to remove her own head for a while, and place it, too, with all its planes and noises and smells and questions not answered and imagined terror and pain and the time-bomb of her own grief, on the cupboard beside the photograph. Just for a while. Then she could rest, wouldn't be so exhausted in the morning.

She will get up at precisely four twenty, dress, comb her hair without looking in the mirror, roll up her sleeping-bag, return the photograph to the towel, tidy her trolley, unlock the door, push her trolley to the back of her block and watch the first planes glide down through the clouds. She will sit in her kiosk and she will wait - again; she will ask - again: *How? Why? Have you seen him, my son, Mathieu Michel Maupeu?*

1,496 words

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