

Maude

Karen Hanlon, <750 words

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My mother knew she was dying. After we had organized her affairs, she asked me a difficult question: What would become of Maude, the 85-year-old mannequin inherited from her mother, who we treated like family? I vowed I would handle it.

But in the town car after the funeral, my brothers and I had yet to reach an agreement. Maude, who'd attended the service, took in our conversation under watchful glass eyes; her painted on eyebrows registered slight surprise at our struggle to settle on her next home.

Maude came into our family when my mother's teenage sister, Mary Maude, died from pneumonia in 1942. Later that year, my grandmother discovered a look-alike mannequin in a dress shop and was so stunned by the resemblance to her daughter she fainted. She begged the owner to sell her so she could take her home.

The mannequin's round face, wideset aqua eyes and elfin nose could have been modeled after Mary Maude (or honestly, after my mother). Her addition to their home seemed a natural way to mourn, and there was minimal alarm when both my grandparents fussed over her like a living, breathing daughter.

It was said that Grandfather gave the life-sized doll Christmas gifts and a Tiffany necklace on what would have been the real Maude's 18th birthday.

Eventually, Mom inherited Maude, and my siblings and I cautiously welcomed her in like a weird cousin. She was interesting and quirky. When she sat

in the living room window seat, she deterred would-be burglars, and from the front seat of our car, she was our silent bodyguard. Mom was never alone. Maude was a companion, rather than a crutch, who attended holiday dinners and our sporting events and even a family wedding.

When Mom died, I thought my brothers and I would share ownership of Maude, but by the time we arrived at our childhood home for the post-funeral gathering, I knew she was my responsibility alone.

Maude watched me set out sandwich and fruit trays. She looked elegant in her black chiffon dress, legs crossed as she relaxed on mom's settee.

The house was as clean as a showroom; Mom and I had prepared emotionally and physically during those final weeks of acceptance and surrender. Together we had distributed Mom's tchotchkes and photographs to loved ones. She revealed the sentiments tied to pieces of jewelry or a vase acquired overseas. I memorized her words and how she gestured with long, delicate fingers. While she started sleeping longer, I shredded paperwork and donated piles of old clothes, including Dad's. I was primed but not ready for her to go.

Mother lived to be 78. I had known Maude for as long as I'd known my mother.

"If I don't keep you, I feel like I'm losing a version of Mom," I said aloud.

"I'll stay if you need me," Maude said.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

I didn't want Maude's significance or my emotional attachment to intensify. I'd had too much therapy to become codependent on a doll.

After the reception, I made some calls. A young man from a local art gallery agreed to take her, but when he pulled up in a red pickup truck to cart her away, I cried. The bearded 20-something stopped and listened while I tried to explain Maude's history and importance.

Sorrow is a funny thing. As I laughed through sobs, I saw that the gallery owner had experienced loss too. Even as he questioned my sanity and Mom's, he pledged to take good care of our family mannequin.

All that grief felt like love. I knew the emotions were for my mother, not a mannequin. Still, when I buttoned her traveling coat and perched the hat atop her rolled bangs, Maude's knowing eyes seemed to question me: How could I abandon her?

"I'll visit, I promise," I said.

I kept my word. Every time I drove by, there was Maude in the gallery window, her long arms and graceful hands pointing to signs and introducing exhibits.

Then she became the exhibit.

The young man's artsy window displays grew edgier. Sometimes he posed Maude in positions that landed the gallery in the newspaper, boycotted, and fined. He repainted Maude's body (anatomically correct), brightened her red lips and added an airbrushed twinkle to her watercolor eye.

She looked happy, delighted to be working again. Her playful expression seemed to say, "I've moved on too; thank you for letting me go."