

The Beloved Coat

Robert Moore, Jr.

Simon walked into class with his eyes down and shoulders slumped. He tried to attract as little attention as possible. He was successful, as several students jostled him as they rushed through the door. It was a perfectly normal day for him.

As he walked to his desk in the back corner, he glanced up. He couldn't help looking at Maebh O'Brien. He knew that she was from Ireland and that her name was pronounced "Mave." She was in all his classes, which wasn't surprising since they had the same major. He also thought that she was beautiful.

She had a round face and blue eyes the color of the sea. Her most striking feature was her hair, though. She wore it long, and it was a dark bronze color with gray blotches scattered throughout. The spots had to be dyed, of course. He couldn't imagine how she managed that, but no one's hair grew that way—blotched—naturally. However she did it, it was a nice effect, and he found it fascinating. All the more so because it matched the color of her coat. A coat that she always carried with her, even during the summer.

As beautiful and interesting as he thought she was, he never spoke to her. But then, Simon rarely spoke to anyone. He turned his attention back to the floor.

He took another step toward his seat but stopped. Maebh's coat

was on the floor. She was talking with her lab partner and hadn't noticed. Simon knew the coat must be special to her, and if it stayed on the floor, someone would step on it and dirty it, or worse, so he walked over and picked it up.

The moment his hand touched the coat, Maebh stopped what she was saying mid-word and turned toward him. Her blue eyes were wide and her mouth gaped. Blushing and self-conscious now, Simon held out the coat to her.

"Sorry to interrupt, but your coat was on the floor," he started to say more but just muttered incoherently instead.

Maebh stared at him a few seconds longer, but finally smiled and timidly reached out to take the coat from him. "Thank you."

Simon nodded and tried to smile back, but his cheeks flamed, and he couldn't think of anything to say. Instead, he lowered his eyes, turned, and slunk to his seat.

For the rest of class, Maebh ramped up Simon's normal level of anxiety. Any time he glanced at her, she was looking at him and smiling.

Why is she doing that? She's never even noticed me before.

His thoughts were in turmoil.

When class was over, Simon waited for everyone to file out like he always did. This time, however, Maebh waited too and walked out with him.

"I wanted to thank you again for rescuing my coat."

He should say something in return. He knew that, but instead Simon only mumbled under his breath and increased his pace. Maebh kept up.

"Have you gotten the latest problem in Data Analysis to plot right? I'm having trouble with the curve fit." Her eyes were wide, and she edged closer to him as they walked.

It was a clear opening for him to offer to help. Even Simon recognized that. "I just used a moving point average." Simon's voice was barely above a whisper. He might recognize it as an opening to offer help, but he still couldn't believe she'd be asking him.

"Do you think you could—"

They'd reached their next class, and Simon rushed through the door and to his seat in the back. He saw Maebh's eyes widen, and her hard swallow, but he didn't turn back. She was still standing there when he reached his seat, and he tried not to notice how her shoulders

drooped as she shuffled to her own seat.

From there, this class went much as the previous one had. When Simon stole a glance her way, Maebh would perk up and smile at him. It fed his anxiety, and she was so distracted that the class got a lecture about paying attention. The whole affair made Simon more self-conscious, but it was the last class of the day. When they were dismissed, Simon snatched up his things and left. His departure was quick enough that, for once, he jostled others out of his way.

The next day didn't help Simon's nerves. In all their classes, Maebh moved to a seat near him. At lunch, he went out of his way to find a hidden corner and, after a few minutes, she was there.

"May I sit with you?" She was still smiling, though she looked timid this time.

For Simon it was too much. Flustered and upset, he said nothing. Instead, he started slamming his things into his backpack. Maebh's eyes widened and she reached out to touch his arm, but jerked her hand back before she did.

"Simon, please don't go."

He stopped mid-motion and gave her a quick glance.

"Look, I'm sorry if I've made you nervous, but I really do need help with that problem in Analysis. Please help me?"

He stared at her for a moment, never letting his eyes meet hers, before he sighed and started unpacking. "Sure, Maebh, I'll help if I can. Sorry I was being rude," he sat back down and mustered a smile. "Where's your algorithm? I'd ask to see your code, but if Dr. Wilkerson sees our programs being too similar, we'll both fail."

Simon fidgeted and looked everywhere other than at Maebh, but he stayed. Now there was a reason for her being there. More importantly, there was a reason he could accept.

Their meetings after that became a regular thing. At first the excuse of studying or working on projects was needed to calm Simon's nerves. It took a while for him to accept that Maebh liked his company. He twitched less and would look at her as time went on, but he still wouldn't meet her eyes. If it happened by accident, he'd blush and jerk his head away. It was finals week before she made him panic again.

"Would you like to come to my place for dinner tonight?" Simon's eyes widened and Maebh hurried on, "I mean we could keep studying, right? We do have fluid dynamics the day after tomorrow."

Simon took a deep breath before he replied, "Uh . . . sure. I guess. Are you sure?" His shoulders hunched and he curled in on himself. He thought about it, though, and realized he'd come to enjoy her company over the past few weeks, so he stamped down his distress and straightened. "Yes, I'd like that a lot," he managed to sound confident about it.

Now Maebh slumped as her tense shoulders relaxed. "Good. I've been wanting to ask you, but was afraid to." She smiled wanly. "It's just I really do need some help with taxonomy and fluid dynamics . . . and it just gets lonely in the house by myself." She blushed and fumbled for a piece of paper. She hastily wrote her address and handed it to him. She gathered her things and said, "Come by about six, okay?" Then she was walking away.

It's like she thinks I might change my mind, Simon thought as he watched her. I know what it's like to be alone all the time, though.

When Simon arrived at her address, he added "rich" to the things he knew about Maebh. The house was a beach house, small and single storied, with plenty of large windows and lined with trimmed hedges. He lingered in the driveway after his arrival.

Did she give me the right address? Is this a joke? Can she really be living in a place like this alone? His thoughts raced before he finally took hold of what little courage he had and went to the door.

Maebh answered the door after he rang the bell. Unsurprisingly, she made him feel uncomfortable. Where he'd come dressed in casual jeans and a t-shirt, she was wearing a white skirt and gray sweater. It's not that she was dressed up, but she certainly looked nicer than he did. To his thinking, she'd dressed for a date, which made him feel drabbier and even more out of place.

"Hi, you look great." He didn't know why he'd said that, even if it was true. He cleared his throat, "I wasn't sure this was the right place. Let me get my stuff. Oh! And I brought some chips and soda, since we're studying and all." It came out in a rush before she could say anything, and he walked back to his car. Maebh walked with him.

"It's okay. I forgot to ask you to bring anything. My parents make sure I have everything I need anyway." She hesitated for a second, then said, "And thank you."

"Thank you? For wha . . . Oh!" Simon's brain caught up and he realized he'd complimented her. He turned away and, though he was blushing, smiled. After gathering his things, they went inside.

"I hope you like sushi," Maebh said. "I should have asked, but it's one of my favorite things, and I didn't think you'd mind." She gave him a quick look to gauge his reaction.

Simon wasn't paying full attention. He was looking around as he set his books down. The back of the house looked out on the ocean through large picture windows. There was a floating dock jutting out from the beach, and a small sailboat was tied to it. The house itself was furnished with a white sectional and gray patterned rugs. The effect reminded him of a stormy sea. The scent enhanced this idea with a spicy, driftwood aroma.

Maebh was opening her mouth to repeat what she'd said when Simon shook himself, "Oh, I like sushi. It's fine. You know how to make it yourself?"

Maebh nodded. "Yep. Like I said, it's one of my favorite things, so I've learned how to buy the right kinds of fish and prepare it," she paused and gave him a grin. "Would you like to help?"

"Sure, if you think I won't get in the way," Simon said. "I've never done much cooking and definitely not something as complicated as sushi. I might mess it all up."

"It's not that complicated. You'll do fine. I'll show you."

They laughed and worked at preparing their supper, talking about their classes and the professors. The atmosphere was convivial and relaxed enough that Simon didn't notice Maebh brushing against him or her hand touching his at every opportunity. When everything was ready, they moved into the living room.

"I'm thinking of going closer to home when I graduate," Maebh said as they settled on the sectional. "So maybe I'll apply for grad school at Cambridge, Oxford, or Edinburgh," she laughed. "Of course, that's assuming I can even get into one of those universities, or other plans don't come up." Her eyes tried to find Simon's, but he was as elusive in that regard as ever.

"It sounds like we have similar plans then, though I'm thinking of staying somewhere on the Pacific Coast." Simon gave a nod. "I might try something other than grad school too."

Maebh scooted a little closer to Simon. "Oh? Like what? What could tear you away from the glamor of oceanic studies," she said it in a mocking, humorous tone, and they both laughed. She edged closer.

"I don't know. I'd thought of applying as crew for one of the re-

search ships for a year or two," Simon shrugged. "Which, I guess, means I'm not planning on getting away from all the glamor after all. I understand they're hard to get on though, so maybe that'll have to be after I go to grad school."

"Well, let me know what you decide, and I'll join you," Maebh's voice lost all its teasing.

Simon chuckled and said, "I'll let you know, but why would you do that? You just said you wanted to go closer to home."

It was then that he noticed that her leg was pressed against his and their shoulders touched. He cleared his throat softly and shifted away a bit. He didn't know what to think, he didn't know how he should act. Could she really mean it? Would she really follow him around the world? Was she really meaning to sit that close to him?

"Yes, but I want to be with you." Maebh's eyes finally captured his. "Besides, that's what I should do since we'll be married."

Simon's smile collapsed.

What? What did she say?

He stared at her before giving a nervous laugh. "You're kidding, right?"

Maebh brought a hand up to her mouth, but it couldn't hide the hurt expression or take back what she'd said. She schooled her features and lowered her hand. Her smile returned. "No, I wasn't. Don't people get married anymore?"

He stiffened. She's serious.

Simon jumped to his feet. "I . . . I should go." He rushed to his backpack, snatched it up, and started flinging his books and things into it.

"Wait!" Maebh's voice was a panicked wail. She reached out to touch his arm, but drew her hand back when he flinched.

"You can't just say something like that, Maebh." Simon said, his voice shaky, but he stood still. The pain in her voice had chilled some of his panic.

"Oh, Simon, I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it," she said, her head dropping and her shoulders slumping. "I'll die without you now."

Simon took two steps toward the door before turning back. "You can't just say things like that, Maebh. Do you know how crazy it sounds? We've only just started hanging out." By now he was shouting. The panic was rising again.

She didn't look up at him, but Maebh nodded.

"I know. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true." She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "You gave me my coat. I can't help it."

"Gave you your coat? It's a nice coat. I didn't want someone stepping on it and messing it up." He paused and took a deep breath. He didn't mention that he also knew how much it meant to her. "You're just sounding crazy right now," He said, the panic starting to edge into his voice again, making it sharp and shrill.

Maebh stared back at him. When she spoke again, her voice was a whisper, "You don't understand."

"No, I don't understand. What am I supposed to understand?"

She wiped away her tears. "Will you trust me for a moment?"

Simon thought for a few seconds, then sighed, and nodded. "Sure."

"Then come with me out back . . . to the dock." She stood up and held out a hand to him.

He licked his lips. "Sure, I'll come with you. Just no more talk about getting married, okay?" Even after saying that, it was a few seconds before he took her hand.

She led him around the couch and to the back door. There she dropped his hand and took her coat from a hook. A chilly wind blew in from the ocean when she opened the door, but she didn't put the coat on. She just started walking toward the dock.

"Simon, do you know what a selkie is?" She didn't turn around to look at him.

"Uh . . . Aren't they half-woman, half-fish creatures that lure sailors to their deaths." Simon looked confused as he followed along behind her.

Maebh actually laughed at that—a short bark of sound.

"No, you're thinking of sirens and mermaids. A selkie is something else." She stopped at the end of the dock and turned to face him. "A selkie is someone who can change between a seal and a human by putting on or taking off their coat."

Simon just stared at her. "Okay, are you trying to tell me you can change into a seal? Are you going to try and drown me?" He couldn't help it, his tone was mocking.

"No, Simon, I'm not going to drown you." She looked and sounded exasperated, but continued her explanation. "If a non-selkie of the

opposite sex gets hold of a selkie's coat, and then returns it of their own accord, the selkie is forced to love them. It's part of their magic. If that person ever leaves them, the selkie sickens and dies." She held out her coat to him. "I'm a selkie, Simon. You gave me my coat."

Without really thinking about it, Simon took the coat. It kept him from leaving, and despite the crazy things she was saying, he found he didn't want to leave, even if "insane" was yet another trait he could assign to Maebh. He just couldn't leave her, so he stood there, holding the coat for her, expecting her to put it on against the evening's chill.

Instead, she took a step back and took off her shoes. Before Simon could say or do anything, she pulled her sweater off. She was naked beneath, which sent Simon into a stammering, stuttering fit.

"Maebh!" He turned away.

She didn't say anything, just added her skirt to the sweater on the dock.

Once naked, Maebh stepped toward him, turned, and shrugged into her coat. Simon didn't turn around until he heard the splash when she jumped into the water.

"Maebh!" Simon's voice was a shriek. He jumped to the edge of the dock and flopped onto his stomach. He reached down into the cold water and flailed about, trying to catch onto her, "Maebh!" How long did it take for a heavy coat like that to become waterlogged?

He brought his arms up to push himself up so he could dive into the water after her. That's when he found himself nose-to-nose with a seal. He stopped instantly and the seal gave him a kiss.

With a startled cry, he pushed himself backward onto his heels. The seal watched him, then ducked beneath the water before propelling itself onto the dock.

Simon noticed that the seal's fur was dark bronze...with gray blotches. Just like Maebh's hair. Just like her coat.

"Maebh?"

The seal watched him for a few seconds, then slowly crept its way to him. When it reached him, the seal hesitated, then flipped onto its back, placed its head against one of his legs, and looked up at him.

It was his turn to hesitate. Slowly, he reached down and stroked his fingers across the seal's soft belly. His thoughts scattered, but he knew this was Maebh. She really could turn into a seal, which meant everything else she said could be true too.

He looked down into the seal's eyes as his fingers continued to stroke her belly. A smile slowly curved his lips.

"You lied, Maebh. You have drowned me." He stared into her eyes; eyes as blue as the sea.

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