

Two Scenes

by Robert A. Rinne

Thomas Wareham stood at the top of the hill and looked down upon the graveyard.

The sepia toned grass, trimmed with surgical care, could not find the strength to be green. Leafless trees with washed out bark surrounded ashen grave markers. Old, mismatched stones marked the boundaries of gardens of dirt.

This is why you wore black to a funeral, Thomas thought. To match the scenery.

Burials didn't happen often. Cremation was what the mortician had assumed.

"Don't you know how to embalm?" Thomas remembered asking the mortician.

He and Tracy Fischer sat in the small atrium off the hall where guests would eventually be welcomed. The modular room could be made smaller to accommodate a more intimate setting, or opened right up if he had a larger celebration of life in mind.

"How many, excuse me, celebrations will be held?" Thomas had asked. He thought the idea to go modular had more to do with generating revenue by holding multiple celebrations at once.

He remembered she had seen him cough and poured him a glass of water from the crystal decanter. The decanter sat on a frilly, lace doily in the centre of a restored antique table that reminded Thomas of something you might find in a farmhouse.

Tracy assured him that the only celebration that day would be his. He coughed again and took a sip of water so she still would think it had to do with his throat.

Don't want to insult her ideas of what a celebration is all about, he had thought.

But now, looking down, he wondered how much room the human race really had left to

bury their dead.

How long until we have ten and twenty floor graveyards? He thought.

The question seemed ludicrous, but questions summon new worlds with their answers.

He dropped his cigarette to the ground and crushed it beneath his heel without thinking. He tsked himself then picked up the dead cigarette, carrying it in his pocket on his long walk back to the car.

He had parked his car far away from the grave and on the shoulder of the dirt road that ran around and through the cemetery.

How long before they install traffic lights? He thought. If I had parked like this anywhere else but a cemetery, I'd be sure to get a ticket.

He found himself chuckling as he walked. In high school, those almost forgotten days of youth, he had a nickname. Despite his lackluster and haphazard approach to school, he barged through throngs of students to get to his class on time. A good student had reason to get to class. He rushed to do badly. They called him 'speedfeet'. Today he felt like he walked like an old man. Thomas was thirty eight years old.

Thomas lifted the handle and the car door opened on its well oiled hinge. He used both hands to open it then lower himself into his seat.

He looked straight ahead as he pushed the clutch in to start the car. A satisfying gush of white smoke wafted from the exhaust. He watched it disappear as he adjusted the rearview mirror. A woman sat next to him.

"Are we going home?" she asked.

She wore a black strapless dress that came to the middle of her smooth, tanned thigh. That was accented by a three quarter length black mink coat. A choker with an ivory pendant

clutched her throat. She sat with her hands together in her lap, overtop a small black, sequined clutch purse.

"I am," he said.

Thomas put the car in gear and slowly pulled away. Each pebble of gravel on the unpaved road croaked slow, low crucking croaps as they drove over them.

"But you aren't. It wouldn't be a good idea. Not right now."

Thomas drove through the main gates of the cemetery. They wrought iron and their black paint had flecked away with time, revealing the dark, red rust beneath. As he went to turn the wheel to the right, he realized he still held his damp, gritty cigarette butt. In the same motion that he turned on his blinker signal he tossed it out the window.

"I'll tell everyone you weren't feeling well and you send your regrets."

She sat in her seat, putting her hands now between her thighs to keep them warm. He turned up the heat but her hands stayed where they were.

As he turned onto the main street, he steeled himself to meet with the people that mourned his wife.

Thomas didn't dream, and was difficult to wake up. If he had been drinking alcohol before he went to bed, you would have to put a mirror by his mouth to see if he was still breathing. Thomas Wareham slept like the dead.

That night, to wake him, Elizabeth Wareham lashed out in her sleep and struck him.

Sweat pasted her bedclothes to her body in translucent patches. Despite being asleep, her eyes were cinched shut so tight her skin went white and where it creased, it was limned with pink.

"Marg," he started to say. He cleared his throat. "Honey, are you okay?"

She lay there on her back, eyes closed tight, hands by her side, gripping the bed sheets.

"Liz? Are you alright?"

"Hunh?" She answered. He jumped back at the sound of her voice. Rough. Unpolished.

Speaking seemed to require effort.

"I can't sleep. I have a headache." She said. She didn't open her eyes.

"You just whacked me. Are you having a bad dream or something?"

"No. If I was dreaming that would mean I was asleep. How can I sleep if I have a headache?" She looked at him now and he relaxed a little. That sound, those words. That was the sound of his wife.

"Right," he said. "I'm going downstairs to get you a glass of water and some Tylenol."

She closed her eyes again and shook her head.

"No, I'll be fine. I'll get it myself."

Thomas grabbed his robe from the chair at the desk. He put on his slippers as he tied a quick knot.

"I'm going downstairs."

He shuffled out the door, past the children's bedroom and down the stairs. The bottom of the stairway opened up to a modest entranceway to the house. A small, touch sensitive lamp glowed dimly in the hall. He tapped it three times so it would shine at its full brightness and guide him to the kitchen.

The table that held the lamp was on the same wall as the front door. Left of that was the front hall closet, slid shut tight, holding back a flood of winter jackets, scarves, hats, mitts, toques, gloves, winter boots, winter work boots, winter dress boots, high heeled winter boots that zipped

up almost to Liz's knee, spring jackets, spring vests, baseball hats, baseball gloves, baseball cleats, golf cleats, sandals, flip flops, sneakers, running shoes, dress shoes, high heeled shoes. The door to the garage was the opposite wall. Looking at that door gave Thomas a great deal of satisfaction. He provided a house for her and their children so they could go directly from the house to the garage. His garage did not suffer from the clutter of worthless junk or collection immobile vehicles. If his wife left the car in the driveway when she came home, he would back it into the garage before going to bed.

The clock above the doorframe that led to kitchen told him it was a little past three in the morning.

He poured Liz a glass of water from the pitcher in the door of the refrigerator and a bottle of Tylenol from the cupboard next to the stove. Then he leaned on the island that separated the kitchen from the eating area, sipping the water and looked out the backyard window. The blinds were drawn and he had a clear view of the backyard. He made out the silhouette of the backyard fence but the plush green grass he tended during spring and summer was invisible in the darkness. In the dark, it looked like anyone else's lawn, whether they took care of it or not.

Thomas finished the glass of water and refilled it. Upstairs, he could see how the nightlight casted long shadows on the walls. He tapped the hall light three times before walking upstairs.

He put the glass of water and the bottle of Tylenol on her night-table then went to the end of the bed to the footlocker. He unlocked it and got out two pillows and a comforter.

"Where are you going?"

Thomas looked up to see Liz propped up on both elbows looking at him. Her eyes were ebony slits in the half-light of the bedlamp she clicked on.

"Sleeping on the couch."

He watched Elizabeth dry swallow five extra strength Tylenol before shutting off her light.

"Too much water and I'll pee the bed," she said. "Remember we stopped the kids from drinking water after seven to keep them from doing that? Come to bed. I promise not to pee on you."

"You're not feeling well," he said. "I'll just get in the way of you having a good night's sleep."

"Well, it just seems you're in an awful fucking hurry about it!"

He took two steps back at the sound of her voice. In the darkness, he wouldn't have know that was his wife in their bed.

"Honey, I have to work tomorrow. If I don't get any sleep I won't be any good."

"Fine."

He heard her roll over and gather the bed sheets and comforter around her.

He took a seat at the end of the bed, on her side.

"Really, just tonight. No worries."

"It's fine. You're the one making a goddamned big deal of it."

"What?"

"Guilty conscience, kiddo?"

"Liz!"

Liz stood maybe five foot one and a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet in construction boots, but the strength of her brawny father were in her muscles. When she meant to hug you, your ribs did not soon forget. He felt all of that when she leaned forward, out of her bedsheets, to give him a great big hug, nearly squeezing the life out of him.

She knitted her hands behind his neck and kissed him on the lips. "I love you, Thomas."

He smiled at her and returned the kiss and she went back under her sheets to try and get some sleep.

He picked up his blanket and pillows and went back downstairs, this time not turning on the lamp. He took his time going to the couch and didn't fall asleep easily.