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Forgiven

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Forgiven

ANITA VAN OUWERKERK

HELEN PEERED INTO THE DARKENED chapel of

Materna's Funeral Home. Turning to the attendant she said, "Thank you. Everything is ready. I suppose the minister will be here in a minute or two. I think I'll just sit in here and wait. Thank you."

Inside the chapel, she moved to one of the three walls covered with flowers. Picking up a tag, she mused, "Who would have guessed Tom would have so many lovely flowers. These are from Thoma Lynn's company. This one is from the English Department at Texas A&M University, Rhona's co-workers." She shook her head. The flowers were from all over the country - most from people who never met Tom.

"Few visited him these past ten years. After his stroke, not even his nephews visited, but here are flowers from them as well."

She slumped into a nearby chair. Suddenly the dying flowers triggered a wave of nausea and brought back memories of her father's funeral. The artistically arranged displays of yellow chrysanthemums, red roses, blue and orange birds-of-paradise now seemed gaudy. She stared at the silver casket. "Why there's a fortune here. Why do we do this? Tom can't enjoy it. Why?"

Behind her, light streamed in as the outside door opened. Helen turned to see the silhouette of large woman against the bright afternoon light.

"The body isn't to be viewed by the public for another hour," she murmured. The woman moved toward her, so Helen pushed herself up and walked to meet the shadowed figure. When the woman's face was clear, she stopped. "Willie? Wilhelmina?" She choked.

"Helen, I'm so sorry."



“...leave those cares.”

They had not spoken in close to thirty years. The younger woman was middle aged now. Her hair was white, but her voice was the same. Peering into her face, Helen envisioned the thin blond Willie had been and saw her again in Tom’s arms in that darkened dance hall.

Helen shook her head, but the scene re-played itself in her mind/ Willie laughing as Tom whirled her around the dance hall and kissed her.

Willie’s sobbing interrupted the scene in Helen’s mind. “I don’t know what else to say, but I’m sorry, so sorry.” Willie’s voice broke.

Helen looked at her, and the pain of remembering the scene; the confirmation of Tom’s adultery flooded her with anger just as it had then. Again tears streamed down Helen’s flushed cheeks.

Willie took her hand. “I had to come, Helen. I had to. I know it was a long time ago, and I don’t know how to tell you, but Tom made me, skinny ol’ me, feel beautiful. I know it was wrong. But, only after I was married did I understand what I had done to you. I had to come today. I have to tell you how sorry, how very sorry I’ve been all these years. Please, forgive me, Helen. Please.”

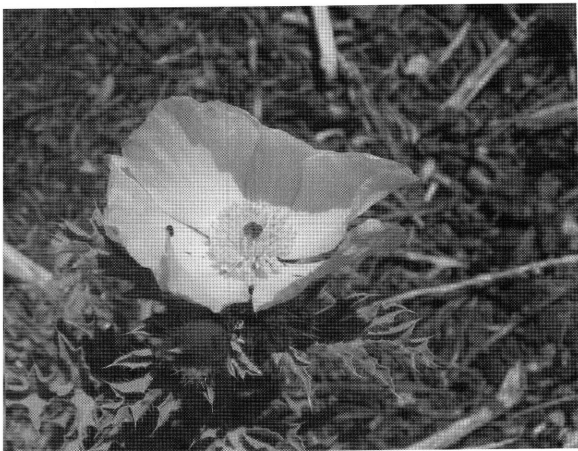
Looking past Willie, Helen saw the banner on a wreath of red roses, Texas A&M Choir-- more of Rhona’s friends.

Then she searched Willie’s tear-stained face and squeezed her hand. “Forgive you? Willie, you were eighteen - a child compared to Tom. It was wartime—so long ago. But...” She paused searching for words, “I’m, I’m glad you came. I’m glad someone who knew Tom came.”

Looking around, she pulled Willie’s hand. “Come, let’s sit here and talk. We only have a minute. I’ve read about Jackie’s basketball success and now she’s the coach



BLOOM FAREN MANUEL



WHITE FLOWER FAREN MANUEL

at Banner State? Everyone is so proud of her. She took that basketball talent to its heights.” Then quietly, “ Tom and I never talked about it, but I know he was proud of her and happy for you.”

“Yes, thank you. Helen, we have too much to say now. Let’s have coffee one day soon and catch up.”

Willie stood, and Helen stood beside her. “Of course that makes sense. Thank you, Willie. Will Jackie be here today?”

“No, she’s coaching a basketball tournament. They have a chance at a trophy this year. Give our condolences to Thoma Lynn and Rhona.”

“Please tell Jackie we follow her team and wish them well. I’ve heard she’s a wonderful coach.” As Willie walked to the back of the chapel, Helen turned to the casket. Then neighbors, friends, and family stopped to extend condolences and share memories. Some remembered how Tom loaned them money, fixed their cars or gave them rides when they were younger.

Finally, joined by her two daughters, she sat in the front row where armchairs were set up for family members.

The service began with the voice of Jim Reeves singing “Knock and the door will open; seek and ye shall find; ask and you’ll be given, but leave those cares behind.” Tom was not religious, but he loved that song.

“.....leave those cares.” Helen’s mind derailed, and once again she asked for strength to get through this day. Squeezing the arms of the chair, her knuckles turned white. She had vowed she wouldn’t cry, and she didn’t - not then - not in front of everyone.

Perspective

JENNIFER GRAHNQUIST

I stand upon the mountain
 And look across the plain,
 But for that layered, rocky range
 My eyes will search in vain.
 That’s the mountains’ paradox:
 One cannot see them from the rocks.
 You must step back to see the view
 That time and space unlocks.
 Yet not to venture from below,
 There would be sights you’d never know,
 Respective of perspective
 That only height will show.
 And so I alternate the two:
 “OF” and “from” the mountain view.
 Westward up and eastward down,
 Learning things I never knew.