

The Tombstone, Ray Bradbury

The Tombstone

WELL, first of all there was the long trip, and the dust poking up inside her thin nostrils, and Walter, her Oklahoma husband, swaying his lean carcass in their model-T Ford, so sure of himself it made her want to spit; then they got into this big brick town that was strange as old sin, and hunted up a landlord. The landlord took them to a small room and unlocked the door.

There in the middle of the simple room sat the tombstone.

Leota's eyes got a wise look, and immediately she pretended to gasp, and thoughts skipped through her mind in devilish quickness. Her superstitions were something Walter had never been able to touch or take away from her. She gasped, drew back, and Walter stared at her with his droopy eyelids hanging over his shiny grey eyes.

'No, no,' cried Leota, definitely. 'I'm not moving in any room with any dead man!'

'Leota!' said her husband.

'What do you mean?' wondered the landlord. 'Madam, you don't — ' Leota smiled inwardly. Of course she didn't really believe, but this was her only weapon against her Oklahoma man, so — 'I mean that I won't sleep in no room with no corpse. Get him out of here!'

Walter gazed at the sagging bed wearily, and this gave Leota pleasure, to be able to frustrate him. Yes, indeed, superstitions were handy things. She heard the landlord saying, 'This tombstone is the very finest grey marble. It belongs to Mr. Whetmore.'

'The name carved on the stone is WHITE,' observed Leota coldly.

'Certainly. That's the man's name for whom the stone was carved.'

'And is he dead?' asked Leota, waiting.

The landlord nodded.

'There, yousee!' cried Leota. Walter groaned a groan which meant he was not stirring another inch looking for a room. 'It smells like a cemetery in here,' said Leota, watching Walter's eyes get hot and flinty. The landlord explained:

'Mr. Whetmore, the former tenant of this room, was an apprentice marble-cutter, this was his first job, he used to tap on it with a chisel every night from seven until ten.'

'Well — ' Leota glanced swiftly around to find Mr. Whetmore. 'Where is he? Did he die, too?' She enjoyed this game.

'No, he discouraged himself and quit cutting this stone to work in an envelope factory.'

'Why?'

'He made a mistake.' The landlord tapped the marble lettering. 'WHITE is the name here. Spelled wrong. Should be WHYTE, with a Y instead of an I. Poor Mr. Whetmore. Inferiority complex. Gave up at the least little mistake and scuttled off.'

'I'll be damned,' said Walter, shuffling into the room and unpacking the rusty-brown suitcases, his back to Leota. The landlord liked to tell the rest of the story:

'Yes, Mr. Whetmore gave up easily. To show you how touchy he was, he'd percolate coffee mornings, and if he spilled a tea-spoonful it was a catastrophe — he'd throw it all away and not drink coffee for days! Think of that!

He got very sad when he made errors. If he put his left shoe on first, instead of his right, he'd quit trying and walk barefooted for ten or twelve hours, on cold mornings, even. Or if someone spelled his name wrong on his letters, he'd replace them in the mail-box marked NO SUCH PERSON LIVING HERE. Oh, he was a great one, was Mr. Whetmore!'

'That don't paddle us no further up-crick,' pursued Leota grimly.

'Walter, what're you commencing?'

'Hanging your silk dress in this closet; the red one.'

'Stop hanging, we're not staying.'

The landlord blew out his breath, not understanding how a woman could grow so dumb. 'I'll explain once more. Mr. Whetmore did his homework here; he hired a truck which carried this tombstone here one day while I was out shopping for a turkey at the grocery, and when I walked back — tap-tap-tap — I heard it all the way downstairs — Mr. Whetmore had started chipping the marble.

And he was so proud I didn't dare complain. But he was so awful proud he made a spelling mistake and now he ran off without a word, his rent is paid all the way till Tuesday, but he didn't want a refund, and now I've got some truckers with a hoist who'll come up first thing in the morning. You won't mind sleeping here one night with it, now will you? Of course not.'

The husband nodded. 'You understand, Leota? Ain't no dead man under that rug.' He sounded so superior, she wanted to kick him. She didn't believe him, and she stiffened. She poked a finger at the landlord. 'You want your money. And you, Walter, you want a bed to drop your bones on. Both of you are lying from the word 'go'!'

The Oklahoma man paid the landlord his money tiredly, with Leota tonguing him. The landlord ignored her as if she were invisible, said good night and she cried 'Liar!' after him as he shut the door and left them alone. Her husband undressed and got into bed and said, 'Don't stand there staring at the tombstone, turn out the light. We been travelling four days and I'm bushed.'

Her tight criss-crossed arms began to quiver over her thin breasts.

'None of the three of us,' she said, nodding at the stone, 'will get any sleep.'

Twenty minutes later, disturbed by the various sounds and movements, the Oklahoma man unveiled his vulture's face from the bed-sheets,

blinking stupidly. 'Leota, you still up? I said, a long time ago, for you to switch off the light and come sleep! What are you doing there?'

It was quite evident what she was about. Crawling on rough hands and knees, she placed a jar of fresh-cut red, white and pink geraniums beside the headstone, and another tin-can of new-cut roses at the foot of the imagined grave. A pair of shears lay on the floor, dewy with having snipped flowers in the night outside a moment before.

Now she briskly whisked the colourful linoleum and the worn rug with a midget whisk broom, praying so her husband couldn't hear the words, but just the murmur. When she rose up, she stepped across the grave carefully so as not to defile the buried one, and in crossing the room she skirted far around the spot, saying 'There, that's done,' as she darkened the room and laid herself out on the whining springs which sang in tune with her husband who now asked, 'What in the Lord's name!' and she replied, looking at the dark around her, 'No man's going to rest easy with strangers sleeping right atop him. I made amends with him, flowered his bed so he won't stand around rubbing his bones together late tonight.'

Her husband looked at the place she occupied in the dark, and couldn't think of anything good enough to say, so he just swore, groaned, and sank down into sleeping.

Not half an hour later, she grabbed his elbow and turned him so she could whisper swiftly, fearfully into one of his ears, like a person calling into a cave: 'Walter!' she cried. 'Wake up, wake up!' She intended doing this all night, if need be, to spoil his superior kind of slumber.

He struggled with her. 'What's wrong?'

'Mr. White! Mr. White! He's starting to haunt us!'

'Oh, go to sleep!'

'I'm not fibbing! Listen to him!'

The Oklahoma man listened. From under the linoleum, sounding about six feet or so down, muffled, came a man's sorrowful talking. Not a word came through clearly, just a sort of sad mourning.

The Oklahoma man sat up in bed. Feeling his movement, Leota hissed, 'You heard, you heard?' excitedly. The Oklahoma man put his feet on the cold linoleum. The voice below changed into a falsetto.

Leota began to sob. 'Shut up, so I can hear,' demanded her husband, angrily. Then, in the heart-beating quiet, he bent his ear to the floor and Leota cried, 'Don't tip over the flowers!' and he cried, 'Shut up!' and again listened, tensed. Then he spat out an oath and rolled back under the covers. 'It's only the man downstairs,' he muttered.

'That's what I mean. Mr. White!'

'No, not Mr. White. We're on the second floor of an apartment house, and we got neighbours down under. Listen.' The falsetto downstairs talked. 'That's the man's wife. She's probably telling him not to look at another man's wife! Both of them probably drunk.'

'You're lying!' insisted Leota. 'Acting brave when you're really trembling fit to shake the bed down. It's a haunt, I tell you, and he's talking in voices, like Gran'ma Hanlon used to do, rising up in her church pew and making queer tongues all mixed like a black man, an Irishman, two women and tree frogs, caught in her craw! That dead man, Mr. White, hates us for moving in with him tonight, I tell you! Listen!'

As if to back her up, the voices downstairs talked louder. The Oklahoma man lay on his elbows, shaking his head hopelessly, wanting to laugh, but too tired.

Something crashed.

'He's stirring in his coffin!' shrieked Leota. 'He's mad! We got to move outa here, Walter, or we'll be found dead tomorrow!'

More crashes, more bangs, more voices. Then, silence. Followed by a movement of feet in the air over their heads.

Leota whimpered. 'He's free of his tomb! Forced his way out and he's tromping the air over our heads!'

By this time, the Oklahoma man had his clothing on. Beside the bed, he put on his boots. 'This building's three floors high,' he said, tucking in his shirt. 'We got neighbours overhead who just come home.' To Leota's weeping he had this to say, 'Come on.

I'm taking you upstairs to meet them people. That'll prove who they are. Then we'll walk downstairs to the first floor and talk to that drunkard and his wife. Get up, Leota.'

Someone knocked on the door.

Leota squealed and rolled over and over making a quilted mummy of herself. 'He's in his tomb again, rapping to get out!'

The Oklahoma man switched on the lights and unlocked the door. A very jubilant little man in a dark suit, with wild blue eyes, wrinkles, grey hair and thick glasses danced in.

'Sorry, sorry,' declared the little man. 'I'm Mr. Whetmore. I went away. Now I'm back. I've had the most astonishing stroke of luck. Yes, I have. Is my tombstone still here?' He looked at the stone a moment before he saw it. 'Ah, yes, yes, it is! Oh, hello.'

He saw Leota peering from many layers of blanket. 'I've some men with a roller-truck, and, if you don't mind, we'll move the tombstone out of here, this very moment. It'll only take a minute.'

The husband laughed with gratitude. 'Glad to get rid of the damned thing. Wheel her out!'

Mr. Whetmore directed two brawny workmen into the room. He was almost breathless with anticipation. 'The most amazing thing. This

morning I was lost, beaten, dejected — but a miracle happened.' The tombstone was loaded on to a small coaster truck.

'Just an hour ago, I heard, by chance, of a Mr. White who had just died of pneumonia. A Mr. White, mind you, who spells his name with an I instead of a Y. I have just contacted his wife, and she is delighted that the stone is all prepared. And Mr. White not cold more than sixty minutes, and spelling his name with an I, just think of it. Oh, I'm so happy!'

The tombstone, on its truck, rolled from the room, while Mr. Whetmore and the Oklahoma man laughed, shook hands, and Leota watched with suspicion as the commotion came to an end. 'Well, that's now all over,' grinned her husband as he closed the door on Mr. Whetmore, and began throwing the canned flowers into the sink and dropping the tin cans into a waste-basket.

In the dark, he climbed into bed again, oblivious to her deep and solemn silence. She said not a word for a long while, but just lay there, alone-feeling. She felt him adjust the blankets with a sigh. 'Now we can sleep. The damn old thing's took away. It's only ten-thirty. Plenty of time for sleep.' How he enjoyed spoiling her fun.

Leota was about to speak when a rapping came from down below again. 'There! There!' she cried, triumphantly, holding her husband. 'There it is again, the noises, like I said. Hear them!'

Her husband knotted his fists and clenched his teeth. 'How many times must I explain. Do I have to kick you in the head to make you understand, woman! Let me alone. There's nothing — '

'Listen, listen, oh, listen,' she begged in a whisper.

They listened in the square darkness.

A rapping on a door came from downstairs.

A door opened. Muffled and distant and faint, a woman's voice said, sadly, 'Oh, it's you, Mr. Whetmore.'

And deep down in the darkness underneath the suddenly shivering bed of Leota and her Oklahoma husband, Mr. Whetmore's voice replied: 'Good evening again, Mrs. White. Here. I brought the stone.'

The End