

Flaherty's Wife

By Bob Papp

Levi Flaherty sat sipping coffee at the little table in the eating nook of his second floor apartment. He watched people bustling in the street below, feeding meters and dashing in and out of shops. The cold coffee tasted like dirty water and he wrinkled his nose. If he'd made it himself, it would have been dark and strong.

"How's the coffee, Flare?" his wife asked. He wondered how she even knew his nickname.

"Oh, it's fine. Very good even." In truth, he didn't know how she'd managed to make the coffee at all, considering she probably wasn't real.

He turned to look and found her lingering in the bedroom doorway. She appeared no different than when he came home the night before. The same frumpy nightgown and distant eyes. She'd greeted him then with a breezy sigh and a cold embrace. Not that the embrace was stand-offish. Just that she herself was cold, like her coffee.

He wondered if he'd seen her before. Maybe someone in passing who he now conjured from memory and affliction to ease his loneliness. She didn't seem familiar though. Plain in a pretty way, with a face looking like it used to smile but didn't so much anymore. Her straight hair frizzed at the ends and her fingers looked thin and fragile. If he ever had a real wife he hoped she'd seem more alive than this one.

"Thanks for making the coffee, honey." Lacking experience in married couple banter, he tried his best to sound like a loving husband. For now, instinct warned against confronting her with the truth. That she wasn't really his wife.

A gust of wind forced a creak out of the old building and the overhead light flickered. She twitched, almost imperceptibly, then asked, "Shouldn't you be heading to work?"

He glanced at the yellow clock on the kitchen wall and swallowed one more gulp with a grimace.

"Yeah, I—I guess you're right." He'd been stalling, reluctant to leave her alone in the apartment, but he couldn't be late for work again. Rising, he washed his cup a few times then said, "So...I'll be back after work."

"I know you will, Flare." A brief smile revealed soft dimples that he noticed for the first time.

"You'll be here then?"

"Where else would I be?"

"Right. Dumb question." Pulling his jacket from a hook, he slipped it on. Nothing feminine hung in sight. "I, uh, saw last night our name was missing again from the mailbox.

Down in the hall. I was going to get a sticker from work to make a new label. What do you want me to, well, put for you?"

"Let's leave me off, ok?" She paused, apparently waiting for a reaction, so he nodded once. "Thanks. You know...Cassandra is so long but Cassie feels intimate. Like something just between you and me. I wouldn't want that name down in the hall, where anyone could see."

Flare considered her words then nodded again. "Right. That's what I figured...Cassie."

At the shoe store, he went through the motions of his day, talking up expensive socks, scrounging in back for 8-wides and complimenting customers on their choices of footwear. Periodically, he found himself wondering how Cassie's feet might look. He didn't think he could be married to someone whose feet he didn't like. Not that he judged people by their feet or had any sort of fetish. It was just that he thought people's feet reflected their souls. In fact, he suspected feet now had "soles" due to a simple error in translation.

That evening, Cassie greeted him again at the door. She still wore the plain nightgown but had added one of his flannel shirts as a cover-up. He noticed she also wore an old pair of socks. The night before, she'd stepped right up and wrapped her arms around him. Though startled to find a woman hugging him in his own apartment, he'd hugged back because, well, what else could he do? This night, though, she stayed distant.

Returning his jacket to the hook, he asked, "How was your day, honey?"

"Uneventful. You?"

"Pretty much the same. I sold some shoes. You know, the usual."

"Do you like your job, Flare?"

He pulled a bag of rice from the cupboard and started a pot of water boiling. "It's ok. You can learn a lot about people from their feet, I think."

"So it's educational?"

"You could say that."

"You're a very observant man, Flare. You see things other people don't. We need that, you know."

He attached an opener to a can of black-eyed peas and turned the crank slowly. Each twist felt like a deeper commitment until finally the can sprung open. When he looked up, she'd disappeared. He resisted the urge to call for her or search the tiny apartment. During a play, you don't leave your seat to go looking behind the props.

Eating his dinner alone at the table by the window, he watched night consume the street below. Afterward, he washed his dishes and moved to the small living room where he read until bedtime. As he entered the bedroom, he risked a glance at the double bed. It

was empty, its covers made, tidy and smooth. When he climbed in, he positioned himself at one edge of the mattress, just in case.

Sometime during the night he awoke to the sense of being watched. As if someone had slipped into his apartment and now lurked unseen in the darkest gloom of his room.

"Cassie?" he whispered. Something hot shifted in the corner, like energy and gravity and grief turning in on itself, slowly. Coiling. It didn't feel like her. Not like his supposed wife.

He let his fingers creep across the mattress but pulled away when he touched something solid and cool. "Cassie?" he repeated. Reaching again, he felt the small of her back. After a moment he held his breath, lifted his hand to her hip and gently rested it there.

"Hmbmm," she murmured in her sleep. A content and lovely sound that Flare had never before heard in his own bed. The energy in the corner eased and gradually dissipated into the night. After a while, he turned on his side and slept with his back to his wife.

When the alarm woke him she was gone. He showered and poured himself a bowl of cereal. A second chair had been added to the table, the one he sat on to tie his shoes. He took his usual spot and she came up behind him, placing a cool cup of thin coffee on the table.

"Thanks, honey," he said, still gazing out the window. He didn't want to look directly at her, fearing she might take flight again like a nervous songbird. She sat in the other chair.

"Are you going to the shoe store again today?"

He looked at her now and noticed new rings under her eyes. "No, I'm off. I only work a few days a week. I have to meet with the estate attorney. And my psychiatrist. Then I thought I'd go to the library."

"Flare, I'm so sorry about your parents. They were so good to us all."

He looked in her eyes, crystal blue, wondering who she meant by "us all." He didn't think it was an accidental slip.

"I wish they hadn't sent me on that vision quest," he said.

"They thought it would help. Has it?"

"No." He'd always seen things that weren't real. While he grew up, his parents encouraged him to embrace his visions. They said the world was short enough on imagination without him denying his own. But it's hard to get along in the real world when you don't know what's real. "I thought the vision quest was supposed to clear my head, or at least make it so I could tell the difference. But it's worse now. Before I only sometimes saw things differently, or caught glimpses of stuff that disappeared when I looked again.

Now, it's...changed. More real." He watched for a reaction but her face remained unreadable.

"Are you sure that's worse?" she asked.

"I just want to be normal."

"That's our problem. Normal controls reality and we just don't have a lot of room left to breath."

She stood and drifted into the bedroom. Flare didn't bother going after her, knowing she wouldn't be there.

In the attorney's office, looking out panoramic windows over the river, Flare learned they still hadn't positively identified his parent's bodies. When the car rolled they were trapped inside. He hoped they were dead before the fire started.

"I'm afraid they're having trouble tracking down dental records, Mr. Flaherty," the attorney explained. She stood beside him in a trim jacket and skirt, watching with him as the river flowed past.

"They had very good teeth," he offered.

"I don't suppose you know what dentist they used?"

Flare thought about it. "I...I don't remember ever going to the dentist. I have good teeth too." He bared them to her, stretching his lips back in what may have seemed a frightening grimace.

She glanced at him then looked away. "Yes, Mr. Flaherty. You do."

She concluded their meeting by assuring him it would all be sorted out and she would help him every step of the way, even with selling the large Victorian home if that was what he wanted. He thanked her and said he'd think about it.

His psychiatrist wanted to know how Flare felt about his parents dying while he'd been gone. What could he say? That he loved and relied on them so much he felt like his heart and life had been ripped out? That he wondered if they sent him away knowing they were going to die? That something pretending to be his wife was living in his apartment? The well-intentioned doctor would overreact and Flare would find himself back in supervised care, so he didn't say much. He left the office with a prescription to help him relax, which he crumpled and tossed out.

After the library he stopped at the grocery to restock on macaroni and cheese and lettuce and bananas. On a whim, he also purchased a single red rose for \$2.99. He'd never bought a rose for anyone before and his stomach twisted as he climbed the stairs to his apartment, cradling the delicate flower in one hand. Cassie didn't greet him at the door and didn't respond when he called. He put the rose in a glass of water on the table then cooked up a dinner of macaroni and cheese on lettuce.

After washing dishes, he slipped downstairs to the hardware store under his apartment. As usual, it smelled like turpentine and oils and old wood. He bought a nightlight shaped like a cartoon kitten, which he plugged into the corner socket in his bedroom before going to bed.

The next morning he found Cassie in the kitchen, slicing a banana and arranging the little disks on a plate. A cup of cold thin coffee waited on the table next to the rose, so he sat down.

"Thank you for the flower, Flare," she said, handing him the plate of banana slices. "It's beautiful."

"It was only \$2.99. But...it reminded me of you."

She sat across the table and watched him eat. "Are you going to the shoe store today?"

"No. I'm off again. I...wondered if maybe you'd want to go to the State Forest for a hike? It's really pretty now with the fall colors and all."

"It sounds wonderful." She turned away to gaze out the window. "But you know I can't leave here."

"But..."

He wanted to say, "But you leave here all the time," only he knew that was different. Something they shouldn't discuss. In a dream, if you start waking and question what's happening, the dream collapses. He didn't want to cast her away by pushing doubt on her. A dream relies on the faith of the dreamer.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "Sometimes I forget." She turned back, a spark flickering briefly in her eyes.

Flare looked down at his remaining banana slices. "What am I supposed to do? About all of it. My parents. You. All of it."

Reaching for the rose between them, Cassie gently caressed its petals. "I made a mistake once, Flare. A horrible, selfish mistake. I was weak and let my love and our faith turn to ash. I should like to redeem myself before it's too late. This is my chance to do it right."

He swallowed the last of his cold coffee, wondering what she meant and what he could ask that wouldn't make her drift away again. Before he could say anything, she pushed a tightly folded piece of paper across to him.

"Will you do me a favor while you're out today?"

"Sure," he said, tucking the paper into his shirt pocket as he rose.

Leaving the apartment, he wandered aimlessly around town, browsing in shops for things he'd never purchase. Eventually, he bought a sandwich and found his way to the

train station where he sat on a bench for lunch. Across the tracks, an old homeless woman watched him, slumped on a bench of her own. She held a paper sack close to her chest. Flare finally felt the courage to read the note Cassie had slipped him, so he pulled it from his pocket and carefully unfolded it.

In elegant script, it read: *Share your meal with the Fiddler.*

When he looked up, the old lady had transformed to a middle-aged red-haired woman with a flowing purple paisley cape, clutching a rosy fiddle to her chest where the bottle-in-a-bag had been. Flare gasped. She gestured for him to join her. Stumbling across the tracks, he stepped up to her platform and handed her his entire lunch.

Accepting the bag, she bowed her head to him. "I'm truly sorry about your parents, lad," she said, her voice husky and lilting. "They were so good to us all."

The next morning, Cassie gave him another note. This one he read at work in the storeroom when he was supposed to be finding a pair of black dress shoes. It said: *Touch the sparkling darkness.* He looked up to see a beam of sunlight streaming through the high back window to glitter off motes of dust in a strangely dark corner. When he reached into the shadowed cloud of sparkles, words formed in his mind: *"I grieve with you for the loss of your parents. They were so good to us all."*

The darkness lifted and sunlight filled the corner and Flare sagged against the wall, slow tears creeping down his cheeks. When his boss found him that way, she sent him home. He wandered the streets instead, looking for things other people didn't see but not finding anything.

It went on like this for another week. Each morning Cassie slipped him a note. When he felt the time was right he'd read it and discover another inconceivable being hidden in plain sight. An ogreish, mossy rabbit with burning eyes hunkering in a culvert. A frail woman clinging to a street-side tree, with skin like bark. A sneering graveyard statue that hissed as he approached. And more. Each said the same of his parents. *They were so good to us all.*

In the apartment, Cassie disappeared less frequently and now slept through the night in his bed. They still lied back to back but each night he inched closer to her cold form until finally he pressed against her, his own feet warming the chilled soles of hers. Three nights they slept like that until, on the fourth, she shook him awake.

"Wha—?" he mumbled, groggy with sleep.

"Fire!" She shook him again and now he smelled the smoke. "It's time for you to go!"

He jumped from bed and stumbled to the kitchen, flipping on lights. The smoke was worse here and he started coughing. Snatching the phone from the wall he jabbed the buttons.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"It's a fire! The building's on fire! Hardware store's downstairs." Flare ripped his jacket from the wall and tried to jam his free hand through a sleeve. Deafening sirens jumbled his thoughts and his phone hand started shaking.

"Is that Albion Hardware?"

"Yes!"

"Are you in an apartment upstairs?"

"Yes, right!"

"Then sir, you must leave the building immediately if it's safe. Help is on the way but we have reports that the store is fully engulfed. Is your door hot?"

Flare pressed his hand on the door to the hall.

"No!"

"Then leave now!"

Throwing open the door, he stumbled down the narrow, smoke-filled stairs and burst into the street, coughing uncontrollably. Red sirens of two massive fire trucks blinded him and the street swarmed with fire fighters uncoiling hoses and hauling equipment. In a blur of activity he found himself seated on a curb and wrapped in a heavy blanket, breathing oxygen through a mask. A burly man in a helmet and face shield bent to yell at him.

"Is there anyone else in the apartment?"

Flare gasped and looked to his kitchen window, suddenly remembering his wife. Cassie stood by the table staring back, holding the wilting rose to her chest. A shadowed figure hovered behind her, hand resting on her shoulder. Flare started to point but she shook her head, gesturing to him and then to her breast. He looked down at his pajama top. Slipping his fingers into the shirt pocket he withdrew a tightly folded note.

My love, be good to us all and I shall be redeemed.

The man grabbed his shoulder. "Sir! Is there anyone else in the apartment?"

Flare shook his head as the street scene blurred. "No," he whispered, "not anymore."