

The Robe

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Pensive and scared, Howard grips the handle of his hard-cased polycarbonate suitcase, containing only a small fraction of his wardrobe and a minute assortment of his many household possessions. Through the darkened window of the subway train, the mysterious tunnels are a blur, with Howard's tall and lanky figure reflecting back at him along with the sparse set of commuters, lost in their own dull reveries. Soon, the train heads out of the somber transit wormhole and lurches forward outdoors where the early winter snow falls gracefully over Kipp's Ravine. Crossing over the Prince Rupert Viaduct some sixty or more feet above the valley's floor, Howard quickly reaches in his travel case to double check the time of his night train's departure out of town from Guild Station. As the subway train continues its crossing over the broad ravine, the metallic wheels and cars clack along the rail tracks in a repetitive mechanical rhythm. Just before his car reaches the opposite side of the viaduct and hurls itself back into the gloom of the adjacent tunnel, Howard gets one last look of a group of hikers walking in the snow along the valley trailhead by Scoot's River.

Two weeks prior to his resolution to pack up his things and leave Northwick City, Howard meets his brother Kendrick in a small independent coffee shop located in Spearsmonk Market, at the eastern edge of town.

"Look Howie... I'm your brother... You can tell me anything..." Howard's older brother Kendrick says, putting down his coffee mug after taking a quick sip.

"It's that... I'm starting to think something's up... She's been acting differently since we got back from our honeymoon... It's like she's a different person than the one I decided to propose to three months ago." Howard says with his errant gaze settling on the oil on canvas portrait of a woman with red hair just behind the small coffee shop's counter.

"What's been weird about her? I'll keep this between us, I promise."

"Just the other day... I looked through a bag that contained things she'd bought at the pharmacy... There were a lot of prescription pills in jars... Like over ten kinds... I went and did a browser search on one of them. Turns out it's often used by sexual predators to put victims asleep before they catch onto being preyed on."

"That's pretty weird man... What else has come up?"

"She seems like totally consumed by her new position in City Bank. It almost feels like she got married to me to have the right connection to work in the executive branch. Lately, I've felt as though our whole marriage was just some kind of stepping stone to launch her career in the high-echelon world of finance and investment banking."

"If it really starts to get tense, you can come crash at my place. Stay as long as you like really... Don't hesitate to call and we can arrange to have another coffee or a meal somewhere."

“Thanks Ken.”

After planning his getaway out of town via the central train station, Howard finishes secretly packing his largest suitcase. Suddenly, as he finishes placing an extra pair of shoes in the travel case, he hears a tap on the guestroom door.

“Honey... There’s something I want to show you tonight... I told you once I wanted to introduce you to a place and some folks that have been really important for me and my personal growth through the years... Can you be ready to go in like twenty minutes?”

“Ok sure... Where are we going?”

“We’re going to a special temple assembly hall... I think it’s about time we really share and admit to one another what keeps us grounded and feeling like we really belong.”

“So it’s some kind of church gathering right?”

“Well... Sort of... I think going there will explain things better... Let’s head off soon!”

After hiding the suitcase in the small guestroom closet, Howard heads into the living room where his new bride is waiting to head out to the curious gathering. After taking his wife’s arm and descending down the front steps of their townhouse, Howard heads out into the early winter weather, feeling a powerful gust of wind creating invisible resistance to his evening commute. After walking a block or two, Howard feels a slight pull from his wife, as she adjusts her red bonnet and heads toward a small grey edifice where he had often noticed strange worshippers gathering and mingling at odd times of the day. Just before heading in after his wife, Howard sees her nod at a doorman and say: “I thought I’d give it a try tonight Wendel... I think we may have a new convert here!” After heading through the double doors of the temple, Howard feels as though he is sealed in. As his eyes adjust to their new and unfamiliar surroundings, he gazes over at his wife as she greets a group of worshippers near a large flaming torch suspended on a cave-like wall of an eerie and occult medieval salon. Looking back at where he first came in, Howard begins to feel claustrophobic.

“This is my husband Howard... He’s a newby here tonight so go easy on him...”

Looking apprehensively around, Howard shakes hands limply with his sweaty palms, noticing a loud rumbling coming from an assembly hall around a darkened corner across from the main doors. After being lead through a short tunnel with bare-rock walls, Howard sees the assembly led by a cultish pastor with grey hair and dark-framed spectacles.

“This is the RECKONING!” The man hollers on-stage as worshippers are stirred to a frenzy and come out of their seats to a raucous applause.

Seeing the strange congregation, Howard begins to have a panic attack. Recoiling from the Assembly Hall, he doubles back, heads back through the tunnel as his wife tries to calm him down. Avoiding her reaching arm, he heads back to the main doors and bolts out, pledging to never return to the temple down the street ever again.

After slipping by Wendel at the door who tries in vain to restrain him, Howard runs back home, opens the door and rushes into the guestroom to grab his packed suitcase. Lucky to have ordered the train ticket for this very night, he takes his travel carry-all and luggage and races out the door without encountering his spouse. Heading north to the bus stop, he waits for the next bus to take him to Wipsom Subway Station, from which he can reach Guild Station and his passenger train out of Northwick City.

After crossing the Prince Rupert Viaduct, and reentering the more conventional darkened subway tunnelscape, Howard starts to ponder why he didn't share one particular fact about his new wife Marion with his brother. Just a week before he arranged to meet with Kendrick and just after the honeymoon, he was going through his wife's dresser and noticed a hidden compartment just below where she kept her underwear. After noticing some white fabric below a slender wood divider, he removed the divider which was put in place to conceal the special contents below it. Inside was a white woman's robe and hood for Klandestine gatherings and worship. After cautiously inspecting the robe and hood, he noticed that the collar of the robe had pink and reddish embroidery on it. Upon closer inspection, he noticed the faint outline and details of a wild rose with its petals and other floral parts. Inside the white hood, in darker stitching, the words 'Deadly Rose' were spelled in cursive letters. After carefully putting the contents back and placing the divider into place to hide the secret drawer compartment, Howard began to feel new apprehension towards the new bride that he shared the bed with and partnered with 'for all eternity'.

[The END]