

A Drink for Thomas Bowman

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Please note, this work includes content related to substance abuse.

The sun is slow in the town of Ripley, Mississippi, casting long shadows over the dusty courthouse steps where Thomas Bowman stands, a cigarette dangling from his lips, the smoke curling with weariness into the humid air. The courthouse, with its chipping white paint and sagging porch, leans with the weight of decades and haunts the man perched before it. Thomas Bowman, attorney-at-law, a mere relic more than a practitioner now, stares out at Main Street with eyes clouded by memory and regret.

Fifty now, worn by time and the bottle, the latter of which has been a cursed companion, bad company, but *company* still. His hands, once steady and sure, now tremble at the joints as he lifts the cigarette to his lips, inhaling deeply, trying to draw strength from the tobacco. It is an old habit, one he picked up in law school when the world was bright and full.

The memory of his wife, Vivian, comes unbidden like a nosy neighbor. It has been ten years since she left. Her presence still lingers everywhere in his mind but the very foreground: in the scent of magnolias through an open window, in the promises of the western wind. He can see her clearly, standing in the doorway of their small house on Pine Street, suitcase in hand, eyes full of sadness and something else. He remembers the way she looked at him, a mixture of tortured love and resigning disappointment that stabbed him.

“Tom... I can’t do this anymore.”

He had stood there, dumbfounded, the taste of bourbon on his tongue, unable to form a human response. She turned then, walking away without a word further, the sound of her footsteps echoing in the silence of the evening. It was only later, much later, that he understood the weight of her departure and the finality of it.

Finishing his cigarette and flicking the butt onto the cracked sidewalk, Tom watches as it bounces once before coming to rest in the gutter. The town is quiet now, the only whispers being the distant chirp of crickets and the occasional rumble of a passing truck. He walks slowly down the street, his footsteps forking in the stillness, past the old drugstore where he used to buy Vivian her favorite peppermint candies, past the faded sign of Doug’s Diner where they had shared countless plates of scrambled eggs, laughing and talking about dreams long gone.



Tom’s office is a cramped, cluttered room on the ground floor of an old brick building, smaller than a studio apartment, the interior lined with books and legal briefs, the desk piled high with papers and drained coffee cups. He sits down heavily in his worn leather chair, staring at the empty frame that sits on his desk. It once contained a picture. When he discarded it in an attempt to move on, he believed that a time would come when the frame would be filled by something else. That was years ago.

He had tried to quit drinking after Vivian left, even managed to stay sober for a few months, but the pull of the amber fluid was too strong. It had become a crutch, a way to numb the pain and fill the hollowness that her absence had created. He came to know that it was a futile effort: the hollowness deepened itself by the irrevocable fact that *he had failed her*.

The years were not kind to Tom. His practice, once thriving, has dwindled these days to a trickle of clients, most of whom come to him out of desperation instead of respect. He is known in town as “that one lawyer who drinks,” a reputation that precedes him and corrodes all that he touches. He sees it in their expressions, the pity, and the judgment.

Standing up from his chair and walking to the window, Tom looks out over the town that has been

both his home and his prison. The streets are empty now, the lights of the few remaining businesses casting long, flickering shadows in the twilight. He remembers the days when Ripley was a bustling hub, when the streets were filled with people and the air was alive with *sound*. Those days are extinct now, replaced by a desolation that mirrors everything and provides no lightning when it rains.

Standing there, lost in thought, Tom hears the sound of footsteps on the stairs. He turns to see a young woman standing on the front stoop, her expression uncertain through the wiring of the screen door, her silhouette questioning the afterglow. His heart quickens and his expression becomes hopeful before opening the barrier. But Tom finds no one there. Only crickets and a distant truck passing by, only a dull porchlight illuminating his confused and regretful eyes.