

Thomas and the tramp

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Thomas' work and married life are turned upside down when he meets a tramp who forces him to change his miserable existence.

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The mosquito bit the knuckle of Thomas' index finger; it irritated him immensely. He stormed around the house, shouted at his wife when she asked him what he wanted for dinner and rubbed at his knuckle until he could stand it no more and tore out of the house in a rage.

The tramp found Thomas crouched down and crying beneath the red children's slide in the park. The tramp looked on at the fat, expensively dressed man, quivering and sobbing and furiously rubbing the bite. The tramp lay his hand on the man's shoulder and stroked him ever so gently as if he were a new born kitten until the man ceased crying and looked up at the tramp through red eyes. The tramp held out his hand, Thomas took it and the tramp led him to his home.

Home was two fraying cardboard boxes put together stuffed with clothes and newspapers. The tramp sat his guest down on a smelly heap of coats and Thomas lay down and groaned, sucking on the bite.

'It is only a bite', said the tramp. 'Here, drink this.' He passed him a bottle of water.

The man groaned and took a sip.

'But it's not the bite, is it?' asked the tramp.

The man groaned even louder.

'No,' said the tramp, 'it is more, much more.'

But Thomas did not hear him; he had fallen asleep.

Thomas was wading through a swamp beneath a red sky. Black clouds hung in the air, heavy and brooding. He made his way through the mud that had the consistency of flesh and guts toward a brain-like construction that floated a few feet above the swamp. He climbed inside the construction and saw his double, naked and caked in dirt, writing and sobbing. Long ropes of flesh and blood were attached to his body, tying him to the walls and ceiling of the building. Upon seeing his double in so much agony, he broke down in tears and fled from the room, jumping into the swamp. As he landed, his legs sinking into the gunge, he closed his eyes as mud splattered on his face. Upon opening them, he saw his wife coming toward him, naked, her black wiry hair wild and unkept, her green eyes wet and wide. 'You bastard,' she screamed, 'You don't love me anymore. Maybe you never did. You're only with me because you're too scared to be alone.' She threw herself on him, hitting out at him with her fists, and he restrained her, grabbing her wrists. 'You don't love me either', he said

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through gritted teeth.

'Why aren't you working Foyle?' Thomas heard that familiar bellowing voice. 'And let go off your wife.'

Thomas turned around to see his boss, arms crossed and crumbs hanging from his beard as usual. 'Not only are you an incompetent employee Foyle but a wife beater too. Time and time again I've advised you how to do your job well and time and time again you refuse to listen, never allowing me to correct you...'

Thomas was not listening. He was looking into those otherwise dull brown eyes, momentarily lit up with self-importance now that an underling was being admonished. He could see his fat torso and breasts, pale and loose, reflected in those eyes. Filled with self hatred, he let go off his wife, burst into tears and tore away, through the swamp of blood and fatty tissue, back to the white building. He climbed inside and ran to his double, writhing and crying, and pulled at it, trying to set it free, but the fleshy chains were too tough. He would have to find scissors to cut them. But where from?

Thomas awoke to find the tramp sitting crosslegged by his side. Thomas was groggy, his eyes opening slowly.

'How was your sleep?' asked the tramp.

'Awful. I had a terrible nightmare.'

'Yet true. Terrible but true.'

'Yes, true.'

'I know. I was there too, once.'

'Aren't you there now? You're a tramp.'

'No, far from it. This is my escape,' he said, waving his hand around the clothes and four walls of the boxes. 'This is my freedom.'

The tramp walked Thomas back to his house. Standing outside the Mansion, the tramp said, 'Tonight, don't fight with your wife. If she tries to start one, listen to her. Say nothing. When she finishes, leave the room. Ok? Come and see me tomorrow.'

But the man could not resist. They fought and slept apart like they had done everynight for the past year. The next morning he went to see the tramp and told him. The tramp said nothing, stood up and walked away cross the grass.

That night Thomas did resist. His wife told him he was lazy, he had no self respect, he did not love her. All truths that hurt yet he remained silent and when she had finished, all red-faced and exhausted from her tirade, he left the room and went to bed. Not long after, she joined him.

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When Thomas told the tramp, the tramp smiled and threw an arm round him.

'Today, go to work and work hard. When your boss berates you, ask him how you can satisfy him. Do it.'

That day, his boss came to his desk and said, 'Foyle, are you still finishing that report? It had better be better than the last one. No wonder your work is so poor, look at the state of your desk! What a mess you are!'

'Yes boss', said Thomas. 'What should I do? How can I raise the standard of my work.'

His boss took a deep breath. 'Foyle, just finish the damn thing!' he said and stormed off.

That night, Thomas' wife's nightly fit was cut in half, for she gave up early, having been given no fat to chew. The next night she said nothing but sat next to him and watched the television, even taking his hand ever so briefly before going to bed.

The week passed. There were no fights at home, no berating at work, and, as instructed by the tramp, Thomas took to running every morning before work on his way to see his mentor.

A week after they had met, the tramp said, 'Things are better, but you are still unhappy. I know.'

Thomas nodded in agreement.

'You still don't love your wife, you still despise your job and your body disgusts you.'

'Yes', said Thomas.

'Tonight, tell your wife you do not love her.'

'I can't', said the man.

'Why?'

'She will go beserk. She will scream and cry.'

'You are afraid of her reaction.'

'Yes.'

'Do it for her, not for you. She knows you don't love her. She is waiting for you to tell her and set her free.'

He did as he was told. She screamed, then wept and finally thanked him for his honesty before leaving him to live with her sister.

Thomas slept well that night. In the morning he woke up early, went for a run and visited the tramp.

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'Today', said the tramp, 'tell your boss you don't like your job and want to leave.'

He did and he was fired.

He returned to the tramp, single and unemployed, and smiling.

'Now,' said the tramp, 'what will you do with your freedom?'

The man was silent. He had not considered this.

'What do you want to do more than anything else?'

The man fidgeted.

'Tell me', said the tramp.

'Write. I want to be a writer.'

'Then go and write. And take this', the tramp took a manuscript out from beneath an old red coat and handed it to him. 'Read it. I wrote it. It's a familiar story.'

Thomas thanked him and stood up to go. 'Why don't you come and live with me?' Thomas asked the tramp. 'You can't live here forever.'

'Can't I? Thanks for the invite, but most likely, you will be coming to live with me. Although I would not let you. I need my own space. I would help you find a couple of old boxes though, and chuck you a few old coats. You could live next door.' The tramp pointed to the empty space next to his home.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

'Before you go', said the tramp, 'take this.'

The tramp handed Thomas a pill. 'Take it before you sleep. It will help you with your writing.'

The man took it. He dreamt he was back in the white building with his double still chained to the walls and sobbing. He went over to his double and kissed him on the lips. The chains fell, the double stopped crying and the swamp outside dried up. The sky turned from red to pink to white and the dark cloud disappeared and from the sky fell pages and pages of words written in Thomas' handwriting. Thomas and his double ran after them, clutching them in their hands, crumpling them up into balls and throwing them at one another.

Thomas' eyes opened and there he was in his own cardboard box, the tramp sitting outside in the sunshine, smiling and laughing and Thomas smiled and laughed too, echoing the tramp. The manuscript lay open next to him, on the last page, the final sentence in bold red ink:

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AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

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