

# Back for Christmas.

## A Short Story by Russell Perry.

Bob Warner rolled the pill bottle around in his hand, and read the label again. He couldn't remember how many times he had read it, but guessed about fifty. He looked at the name again "Temazepam"; they had been prescribed to his wife about a month ago to help her sleep. *It was ironic, he thought, she got them to help her sleep, but before she had even opened the bottle, death had come to her while she slept.*

He put the bottle down on the kitchen table and took up his glass, swallowing the contents before refilling it from the bottle of Blue Label Scotch in front of him. He took another swallow from the refreshed glass, and then stared at the remaining contents, which now represented half a glass. He smiled sardonically to himself as he thought that all his life he had seen himself as a "Glass half full" type of bloke, but these days the glass was decidedly "Half empty".

The bottle had been a gift from his son, and he had been keeping it for a special occasion. Now, as he continued to stare into the glass, he thought. *This is definitely a special occasion.*

His wife of fifty-eight years, Thelma, had passed away a week ago today. She had hoped to make Christmas, but her heart had other plans, and she had passed a little over two weeks short of her goal. It wasn't as if it had been unexpected, as she had been ill for some time, but Bob still had not been prepared for the gut wrenching emptiness he now felt, and the absolute despair that gripped him at the finality of the loss of his soul mate.

They had been together since they were fifteen, sweethearts since school, and had married when Bob was twenty and Thelma nineteen. They had raised their only child, Jack, in this house and had led a wonderful life here, a life that Bob never wanted to end. However now, it seemed to him, that it had.

In his overwhelming grief, Bob felt that without his beloved Thelma, there was no life. He had not been well himself during the past year. There was nothing life threatening about his problems, although now Bob found himself wishing that there was. His problems were mostly to do with his joints, making it hard for him to get around, and he couldn't do the things he enjoyed any more. He missed his gardening and the occasional bit of fishing, and Bowls was out of the question these days with his bad knees.

During the last week, once the loss of Thelma had really hit home, his health problems, and what he perceived to be his absolute loss of the quality of life, had Bob longing for death himself. He wished he could follow her into the next life, his grief truly convincing him that there was nothing left for him in this one.

He was feeling quite drunk now as he rose from the table and made his way unsteadily to the CD player. He set his and Thelma's favourite album, Sinatra's Greatest Hits, to play, and then sat back down in a lounge chair with his scotch and the bottle of pills. As Sinatra began to sing "I'll Be Seeing You", he emptied the first mouthful of pills onto his tongue and washed them down with a swallow of scotch. Then with tears rolling down his face, he leaned back in the chair and repeated the dosing until he fell asleep.

He found himself strolling in a wonderful green garden, full of tomato, lettuce, capsicum, carrots and many more of his favourite vegetables. He looked around him thinking there was something familiar about this garden. Then it came to him, it was his father's vegetable garden, the way he remembered it from his childhood. Then a smile came to his face as he remembered the fresh aromas of the herbs and plants, the smell of the tomato bushes and the damp, freshly tilled soil. As he plucked a leaf of basil and brought it to his nose to enjoy its nostalgic fragrance, a voice came from behind him.

"There you are Robert, what are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here, what's wrong with you boy?"

He spun around as he recognized his father's voice, thinking, *it couldn't be*, he had been dead for almost ten years.

He stood as he raised his hand to shade his eyes, and he squinted as he tried to make out the shadowy figure with the bright sun directly behind it. Then as his eyes adjusted he saw, striding toward him down the space between the garden drills was his father.

"Dad?" He said quizzically, "Is that you Dad?"

"Yes mate. What have you done to yourself?" Then he repeated. "You're not supposed to be here. I didn't think a son of mine would take the coward's way out. You've got to go back, face up to it boy. What about your family, how will they feel about this nonsense?"

Bob then realized what was happening, he was dead. The pills had done their job. He hung his head like a small child in trouble, and as his father approached he mumbled.

"But I can't go back Dad, there's nothing to go back to, she's gone."

Then he brightened as a thought occurred to him, and he lifted his head looking around expectantly; he looked back to his father hopefully and asked. "Is she here Dad, is Thelma here?"

His father glowered at him as he growled back.

"She's not here son, **you're** not supposed to be here. Jack and the children need you. How will their Christmas be now? Both you and Thelma gone, some Christmas this will be for them."

Bob shook his head, "They don't need me, they have each other. Why would they want me, I'm useless, just a hindrance."

Jack senior's voice softened slightly and he spoke as if to a child.

"Don't talk stupid Robert, who taught young Matthew how to put a hook on a fishing line, and throw a hand line out further by swinging it above his head, and Lucy, you taught her how to ride her bike and wrote all those stories for her. How will she cope with losing you? Who did Jack come to for advice when he and Sarah were having problems or when his business was going through a rough patch?"

He paused after posing the questions, but didn't expect an answer.

"You, that's who, not so useless eh? Now think about them and how much more they will need you, and how much joy you will find, helping to mould Matthew into the fine man he will become, and Lucy into a strong and beautiful young lady, exactly how you and I did with Jack. They need family boy."

Jack senior paused for a moment to let his words sink in then continued.

"Now, think how you felt when I left you, think how you are feeling now, losing Thelma; then think how they will feel if you go. You have to go back to them Robert, they need you more than ever."

Suddenly Bob heard the gentle lapping of waves, his father was gone as he found himself on a beach.

He was standing on the sandy bank at the mouth of a wide creek, where its clear waters met a sparkling ocean. Small waves were breaking over the water flowing from the creek and they were seemingly pushed back as the tide ran out and the flow from the creek gained the upper hand. He looked to the clear blue sky as a breeze tugged at his hat and ruffled his loose-fitting shirt. It was his favourite fishing shirt and in his hand, was his favourite old Whiting rod.

He turned as a young voice called to him excitedly.

“Granddad, Granddad, I think I got a bite.”

It was his Grandson Matthew, fishing along side of him, and now furiously reeling in the line on his rod.

“Careful now Matty,” Bob cautioned, “He’s only got a small mouth. You don’t want to reef the hook out and lose him.”

The end of Matthew’s line came into the beach, and as he lifted the end of the rod, it hung suspended in the air, empty, except for the remnants of a sand worm hanging raggedly from the hook.

Matthew looked up at his grandfather with a dejected frown on his face, as Bob instructed him.

“Mate you have to be a bit smarter with Whiting. You must wait until they start to run before you can hook them. Here I’ll show you.”

Bob moved over to his grandson.

“Now put another worm on like I taught you and cast in again.”

He waited until Matt had his line in the water then explained.

“Now put your finger on the line just here.”

He placed Matthew’s finger on the line.

“Hold the line against the rod and when you feel him start to move away with the bait, you keep your finger on the line and jerk back on the rod. Then when you feel the weight, you can start winding him in.”

They stood in silence for a few minutes, their eyes fixed on the spots where their lines met the water. Then Matthew called excitedly.

“Another bite Granddad, he’s back.”

“OK now.” Bob said quietly, calming the excited lad. “Wait until you feel his weight start to move away, then do as I said.”

Matt suddenly jerked the rod skyward with a great flourish and started to wind the reel.

“Stead now,” Bob coached, “keep winding, but not too fast. Just make sure the line doesn’t go slack. That’s it, bring him in.”

A 20 cm Whiting broke the surface close to the beach, then it was flapping about on the sand as Matthew landed it and shouted with glee.

“Granddad, Granddad, I caught my first fish, my first fish. And it’s a beauty isn’t it Granddad.”

“Yes mate it is.” Bob ruffled Matthew’s hat. “It’s a ripper. We can take it home and Grandma can cook it for tea.”

Scenes came over him in waves. Now he was trotting behind his granddaughter as she rode her bike in a park. The sun was shining warmly on the pair, and as they glided along the bike path Lucy was shouting to him.

“Don’t let go Granddad, don’t let go, I’ll fall off.”

He chuckled as he jogged beside her.

“I’ve got you darlin’. Don’t worry. Just keep your balance and push the pedals.”

He actually had his hand away from the back of her seat, and she was riding all on her own, and when they came to the end of the path, he told her as much.

A frown furrowed her beautiful brow as she scolded him.

“You tricked me Granddad. That’s naughty.”

He chuckled and gave her a hug.

“Yes, I did Darlin’. But you were riding all by yourself. I would have grabbed the bike if you started to fall, but you didn’t, you did a great job, I’m very proud of you.”

Lucy smiled proudly and they turned and went back along the path. This time she rode all the way by herself.

Bob was suddenly back in his father’s garden and old Jack was again in front of him.

“You back again? I thought you were going back to them.”

Bob blinked bewilderedly and looked at his father.

“I was just with Matthew; on the day he caught his first fish. And I was with Lucy as she rode her bike on her own for the first time. I had almost forgotten how excited they were and how special those days were.

I had just shown Matthew how to catch a whiting and he pulled one in like an old pro, and Lucy was so beautiful when she scolded me, and then so proud when she realized what she had achieved.”

His father snorted at him.

“And you want to give that away? What’s wrong with you boy? Have you lost your marbles?”

Bob’s world blurred and he was in another garden, his garden. This time it wasn’t the garden smells that caught his attention, he could smell a familiar perfume, it was her perfume.

He spun around quickly one way and then another, and suddenly there she was, his beautiful Thelma. She looked as she had before her death, before she had become ill. She was radiant, and to him, as beautiful as the day they had married.

She came to him, a look of bewilderment on her face.

“What are you doing here my love? It’s not your time. What are you trying to do?”

He took her in his arms and whispered into her hair.

“It doesn’t matter Thel. I’m here with you now. We’re together again.”

She pushed him back and held him at arm’s length.

“No.” she said frowning. “No Robert, you can’t be here. You must go back. Why would you do something so stupid?”

“But Thel, I couldn’t live without you.”

Still holding him at arm’s length, Thelma looked at him with a frown.

“Yes, you can, and you will. It’s not all about you Robert, what about the people who love you?”

Bob looked into her eyes, those eyes he had loved since he first saw them.

“But **you** left Thel. **You** went away.”

Thelma clucked her tongue and dropped her hands, speaking with an exasperated tone.

“I was sick Robert. Do you think I wanted to leave? I would never have left you and the children if I had a choice, you know that. ...What if you were to have this conversation with

Jack or Matthew in years to come? What would you tell them? That they were not important enough for you to stay?"

Bob was confused, torn between wanting his beautiful Thelma back and now realizing the grief he may cause the rest of his much-loved family.

"I'm sorry Thel. My grief made me stupid and selfish. I wasn't thinking straight."

Thelma placed her hands on his face and smiled gently.

"You go back now my darling. I'll be here waiting when it's your time, and until then I will be always with you. I'll be there in your dreams, and when you want to be with me, close your eyes and go to our favorite places, I'll be there, I promise."

He smiled sadly at her and nodded, he knew he must go back now, and he suddenly felt himself rushing away from the garden.

Bob opened his eyes and slowly focused on his surroundings, the garden was gone, as was the aroma of the soil and plants, but for a second he could still smell her perfume, and then it was gone also. He was in a hospital bed; his throat was sore and he felt drowsy. He saw his son asleep in a chair beside the bed and tried to sit up. His movement roused Jack and he jumped up and rushed over to him.

"Dad, you're awake, thank god. What the hell were you trying to do?"

He tried to speak, but in the end it was a croak, tears filling his eyes.

"I was very stupid Jacky, I wanted to go with her, but they wouldn't let me."

Jack sat on the bed at Bob's side and placed the palm of his hand gently on the side of his father's face."

"Don't worry about that Dad, you're here now, that's all that matters. You would have succeeded, if I hadn't called in when I did. We were able to get you here in time. What did you mean? Who wouldn't let you?"

Bob smiled at his son.

"You'll think I'm crazy, but I saw your Mum and my Old Man. They both talked some sense into me, showed me what an idiot I was. They sent me back."

Jack studied his father for a few seconds, and then smiled back at him.

"They were always smarter than you eh?...Thankfully."

A week later, on Christmas morning, Bob sat with his family around the tree in the lounge at Jack's house. As he opened his gifts, he watched Matthew and Lucy laugh and chatter in delight as they opened theirs.

*Silent Night* was playing softly on the stereo, and the Christmas smells of roasting pork and turkey wafted in from the kitchen, as Jack popped a cork, to begin their traditional champagne breakfast.

He thought back to earlier that morning, as dawn was breaking. He had lain in his bed, and for the first time in weeks, he was happy to greet the day. However, before rising he closed his eyes and went to another Christmas day, of a few years before, when the children were smaller, and Thelma was well. He looked to the seat beside him, and there she was, as she said she would be, smiling gently at him, and a peace came to him, as he realized that she would always be there.

Bob came back to the present and looked around at his family, and tears of joy welled in his eyes as he thought. *I'll come to you someday Thel, and we'll be together again. But not today, not for a while yet.*

The End.

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