

## The Story of Thelma and Rinn

Rinn walks the wet road into the night. From many curtained windows (if anyone looked) the town could see him crossing its brief briar patches of yellowed light, cutting the edge of shadowed thresholds never there.

At this hour it is never certain how many are in the shadows. One can become two, two four – or four may merge by equal steps to one.

Watching Rinn vanish to a dim blur, I turn back to the lighted church door from which I watch and return to my night shift, cleaning for the kind woman who looks after the church after hours, a deft woman whose real vocation is to teach dance. Working late alone, I see Rinn come and go.

Rinn is small, wiry, and black-haired. His face betrays a lively spirit, but no one would call him handsome. Open, introspective, he has had many close friends but never a lover.

Things have not gone well here. In this drafty church something indefinable is wrong. How little I've made of my life! Not in the greatness of the world, but in the goodness of my soul. True shame is raised from remorse for having been in so many ways smaller and meaner than our true selves.

The church has a library, where I console myself and read. Retreating to the solace of a story, how often two stories, though different, in the end turn out to be the same story.

For example, a boy and a girl are in love, and love to dance. We do not know their names. The boy's mother is cruel, a minor witch. She opposes their love and is not a woman to be crossed. The boy pleads with his mother, but she is stone.

What could he do? Though he and his lover have given each other their hearts (turning endlessly around one another like vines), his mother will not hear of it. She will not hear of it. Even though someone should call her all her life – and someone has – she would not hear.

The boy went to find his love, intending to say something – perhaps even ready to say that he could no longer see her. He went perhaps even resolved to obey his mother, but as soon as he saw her he knew he could not. He found her at the mid-summer dance, the town's main street closed and alive with vibrating figures. There, love a thrill trilling along her limbs, he caught sight of her among the milling people crepuscular as the fresh breaths of night carried off the day's heat. He saw her and there was no moment then when they were not already one. Dancing together, they spun round and around.

And from far off, his mother saw; she didn't even need to follow him. Straight away she put on the tall, pointed witch's cap decorated with moons and stars. She saw them

dancing and the dancing hardened her already hard heart. His mother, a minor witch, banished the girl as they danced. She faded from his arms and disappeared.

I lay aside my reading as it is time for me to make my appearance say that I am busy. Everyone else is done with their work and leaving for the evening; they gather saying goodbyes in the foyer. But I stay late, until work is done, to lock up and go when I am ready.

Rinn walks to the library, which stays open late. Rinn knows what it is to read alone at night in a church where the shadows burn in small red votive cups, amid the hundreds of thousands of souls of thoughts left there by parishioners who have all gone home – thoughts that struggle slowly into prayers, their thinkers oblivious now in their beds, the church graveyard full.

I wait for them all to go, looking forward to being alone with God, the fragments of myself, and the lamentations of privacy. Rinn lets himself out the church kitchen door, looks at it in the rain-wet night, and walks away alone. Later, I may walk the wet empty streets to visit my sister, but just now she is not there; she is visiting a friend.

When they leave, everyone is drawn to the church kitchen like moths, gathering in its homely light, saying good-bye, good-bye as they put on their wraps. The bread of life is be found in far greater quantities in that kitchen than in the sterile church to which it is attached. The kind woman for whom I work always makes it a point to say good-bye to me personally. Pushing open the door through which she leaves, she reminds me with a smile to practice my dance. After she leaves, I pour myself some orange juice from the church refrigerator and take up my book.

Beginning again to read, I am interrupted just when I most expected to be left alone – a flurry of noise and a group of young men burst in. They look as if they have just come in from a game, perhaps a soccer match – though they may just as well have been at war. One is rough-looking, long-haired, like the old Norse God of muscle and hammer. Though rough he's kind-hearted, but tonight they have perhaps accidentally just now killed two of this evening's enemy. The boys are uncertain; worry rushes out of each mouth, half-interrupted by words.

Though we don't know one another, we fall into intimate talk, four of us, leaning forward, confiding in one another. We are at war and the others with whom we war also number four, evil, destructive. The boys have killed and beheaded two of them, and need a place to keep the heads – perhaps they might temporarily use the church refrigerator?

After talking it over quietly we agree and they go, and I pick up again the thick antiquarian book of tales in which I'm in the midst of the Story of Thelma and Rinn. It is an old story built on older foundations, as is the Western world; a story of two halves of an original whole to which they cleaved until cloven by early humans or an ancient God.

Thelma wanders among a group of girls who are inseparable friends. The four wade in the mist as if it were water, just at dusk. Talking quietly, they sometimes take one another's hands; sometimes a word or laugh rises above their musical conversation that runs like a river just below the threshold of discernment.

The mysterious is only that to which we do not ordinarily attend. The mist is only the breath that floats just above the surface when the air cools more quickly than does the water.

Watching them wade, each lovely in her own way, the story takes them up and names them. Of the four, Thelma is the beautiful one, gentle and kind. Her friend, Thor, is spunky, pert, not at all bad looking, but better known for a prowess which resides in a kind of temerity, a willingness to say anything, to speak up, to tell the truth, to call attention to what others would like to hide (or hide from), to tweak the nose of authority.

Thelma and Thor wade talking a little away from their friends. The mist is languorous; their talking slows, their ways part, and Thelma trails off and fades from sight like one of the mists hanging over the waters that floats a moment and disappears. Thor sees, and leaps toward her – a moment too late. She is like a bird that suddenly hits a window, is startled by the thump and falls to ground.

Resting the hard cover of the heavy old book in my lap for a moment, I reflect on my sister who is visiting her friend, Laura, a kind and gentle young woman with shoulder-length black hair and a beautiful fair face. Laura has married a foul-tempered man, big, beefy, absent most of the time, a man whose indecency always reminds her that he's better gone the few times he's back. Though unhappy, she is afraid to leave. He is unable to understand her, insensible to that beauty which rises from her soul like a warm air. A shallow, brutal man, he is of as little consequence as he fears. They live in a trailer park – she's always living with such men in such places. My sister, visiting, sits on her couch and keeps Laura company; they talk as she irons her husband's shirts. This evening Laura seems preoccupied. Curious, my sister watches her get the cloth too wet and look intently into it as she irons.

Thor and her two remaining friends look everywhere for Thelma, searching the misty waters. Again and again they call her, but she is gone. While with me, the three young men talk seriously of the evil ones – a seminar of boys in a church kitchen doing God's work. One leans towards forward, earnestly willing to oppose them. Talking intently, we decide we are all in. Two leave then, taking up conical sorcerer's hats as they go to find the girls; two stay behind. It sometimes happens that four no longer oppose four, but only that remains within which all possibilities are gathered.

Rinn underlines as he reads, drawing lines with a bright sword point. If all the pages were transparent, his underlining would draw a quick gasp of recognition in the picture

the layered pages build up, penciling in the compassionate outlines of Thelma's face. Her mouth seems to move as the pages rattle, inaudibly voicing his name.

The boy whose dancing lover disappeared from his very arms is afraid – afraid that he has failed his own life. He lives alone with his mother, a woman hardened by life. She recoils from the fear of losing him, her only son, as from a doom through which she reaches to seize him the more desperately, insensible to the fact that dooms are set once for all, never for a single one alone.

The boy's mother holds so hard it is as if she has four hands; he fights to break their grip. He works nights cleaning a nearby church to get away from her, but brings her home his pay. He dances alone in the dark church halls with his brooms and his mops, where sometimes he imagines that kind women teach him what he so desperately needs to know. He gathers up the parts of himself from the four directions as if they were soul-mates, friends who would never leave; he scatters himself to the four winds as if fragmented into pieces that no longer know themselves. He reads, and sometimes imagines he can hear the dancing of a woman's voice in whispered words, reciting a marvelous anonymous poetry whose authors all have disappeared:

*Oh Westron Wind, when wilt thou blow  
that the small Rain down can rain?  
Christ that I were in my Bed  
and my Love in my Arms again.*

And then, Oh Rinn, when will you dance? Oh Rinn, oh when? oh when?

Rinn runs from the church, fleeing into the vast rain-wet night, the door left wide and flapping like a shirt, having heard – oh what? He disappears like Laura's attention into the wet spot on the ironed shirt, like Thelma into the mist.

Listening intently to the wind winding through the many-fingered trees, I let myself out late at night alone and forget to lock up as I turn to walk the night-empty rain-shiny streets to where my sister waits. Streetlights shine on the black streets as if on a night river.

Two Guides come walking up out of the mist, walking over the waters, dark mysterious beings, proud male angels like those who guard God's gates with fiery swords, but here dark fire against which only the silhouette of shape can be seen. They speak softly with Thor; the other two girls draw away.

At last Thor is persuaded to put on the tall pointed witch's cap, decorated with stars and moons to go call Thelma out. She goes with the two Guides, who take her deep into the misty waters. She calls and calls for Thelma. As Thor concentrates, her face darkens and become hairy, she begins to look like an ape. She calls, "Thelma, Thelma." The power in Thor's voice will call her back.

The girl who was banished, lovely in her dance, spins and spins, turning in circles, white veils billowing around her, dancing in my heart. Her veils blow like mist.

In her trailer, Laura irons and my sister watches and later tells what happened. A knock comes at her door – a little tap. Laura looks up, but does not go to answer it. Instead she irons more intently than ever. She wets a larger area of the shirt and stares into it. My sister wonders why she isn't answering the door.

Thor's voice swims up through the wet fabric, calling, calling. Laura reaches to her, going down into the fabric until she disappears. My sister watches her vanish.

In the misty waters, Thor has succeeded. The mist parts like a fabric, and there is Thelma.

Rinn ran until he sank into a single breath. His breath goes out like a call, a call that joins in the answering as Thelma and Rinn rush together. I've left the empty church unlocked. Walking quickly to meet up with his sister and her friend Laura, we go downtown together to the street dance.

The boy has just come from his bath wrapped in a towel. He dances around his mother, winding the towel around her, tangling her legs in it, binding her. At first, she doesn't understand. He dances his love, not her; he is dancing with his love, the girl who was banished. Dancing together, spinning around and around in one another's arms, the towel becomes their veil, a cloak that twirls around them as they spin, the finest lace, pure white, a mist.

The mother hears a voice calling her; her son is dancing, spinning, with Laura. At last it dawns on her – this was foretold, the loss of her son, his marriage with Laura. She is furious, she would grab his arm but is hampered by the foot-entangling towel. Suddenly she hears her own name being called. A burning intense angel leans down out of heaven. Thor thrusts her face into her face; she has a diamond on her breast and a diadem in the middle of her forehead that burn with intense light. She scolds the mother like a little child, saying "You should have come when I called, why did you not come when I called?"

Thor's face is hawklike; as it grows more and more to resemble the hawk's, a beak forms from her nose and her eyes become sharp – the piercing eyes of a raptor that bends over its prey. Shrinking in fear, falling back on her couch, a grid of lines covers the mother's face and resolves into scales as she becomes a fish, the food of the fisher hawk.

Thelma joins Rinn, a boy and girl dance, Laura has broken free from the trailer park and dances with her lover. The heads of no enemy lie in cold storage in a church refrigerator. Four and four young men form a single soul, two hearts need not grow into one hand, two dancers need no teacher, prey becomes predator as it feeds, angels gather whomever most needs their help, no mother has lost her son, four friends

remain inseparable, the winds gather from the four corners, all the pieces of a life are swept together.