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ASHES

by

Robert R. Lehan

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Ashes

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SETTING: *A quiet section of beach at twilight*

CHARACTERS: *1 man/1 woman;*

TOM: *Early seventies, recently widowed.*

BARBARA: *His dead wife, barely seen in dim light*

ETC:

A simple set indicating the ocean and a ground row of rolling sand dunes above a section of beach. SOUNDS OF SURF AND SEA GULLS compliment the set to provide the desired atmosphere while LIGHTING is used to effect the time of day.

ASHES

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(AT RISE: We hear the SOUND of SURF and GULLS. In a few moments lights fade up silhouetting a ground row of rolling sand dunes above a section of beach at twilight. The lights reflect the glow of the setting sun which darkens as time passes. At CENTER, a circle of stones surround a small, glowing fire pit. To the LEFT of the fire pit is a music stand from which hangs a wind chime. Above the stand is a straight-backed wooden chair with a small outdated tape player on the seat. As the light of the sky fades, the light of the fire increases, casting a dark shadow across the stage. In the darkness, BARBARA quietly appears in dark colored clothing carrying a script. SHE places the script on the music stand then picks up the tape player. BARBARA sits on the chair and raises the volume on the tape player. The SURF SOUND becomes louder. BARBARA holds the tape player as she would a baby.

The SOUND CONTINUES as TOM, an older gentleman wearing khaki summer slacks, an unlettered sweatshirt and sneakers, enters crossing to the darkened right apron. HE carries in his hand a white, quart-sized Chinese food carton. TOM stops and looks out over the "ocean" and sighs sadly. BARBARA deliberately and carefully raises and lowers the volume of the tape player to echo TOM's sigh. TOM crosses toward the glowing fire and stands with arms folded, the carton dangling by its handle from one of his fingers. HE sighs again and once more the SURF SOUND echoes his sigh. TOM crosses down center to the water's edge. After a moment, HE opens the carton and attempts to pour the contents into the water but can't bring himself to do it.)

TOM

(Whispering) No!

(TOM reseals the carton and returns to the fire. HE stands, torn, unable to decide.)

I can't!

(The SURF SOUND fades up, then lowers to underscore the voices. At the music stand, BARBARA, in the dark with the tape player, reads her lines as if they were the SURF itself.)

BARBARA

Youuuu

TOM

Huh?

BARBARA

Promissssssed

TOM

What?

BARBARA

Yooooou PROM-isssssssed!

TOM

What? I don't I don't believe

(TOM is intensely alert. He holds his breath, lifts his head, listens to the left, to center, to right. His lips form the unheard word "Barbara".)

TOM

Barbara. *(SURF SOUND up, then down)* Barbara? *(Louder)* Barbara?

(SURF SOUND rises and lowers once again. Agitated, TOM paces.)

TOM

(Mumbling) Stop this, Tom. Stop it. This is crazy. This is CRAZY! *(Stops pacing. Listens. Waits.)* Barbara? *(SURF SOUND up then down.)* Is that you? *(SURF SOUND up. Pause. Down.)* You're here, aren't you?

(SURF SOUND flares up in response. It then fades down and out. For the first time now there is total silence. TOM reflects on the silence. A long pause.)

TOM

(Whispering) Talk to me. Please.

(We hear the faint sound of BARBARA'S WIND CHIME. The fire light flares up, dies down.)

BARBARA

(From the darkness, remaining unlit, speaking in a slow, windy whisper that mimics the sound of the surf.) Tommyyy Tommy

TOM

Yes . . . Yes. I'm here.

BARBARA

Don't - be - afraaaaaid.

TOM

I'm not. I'm not afraid. . . . *(WIND CHIME and the SURF SOUND return underscoring the scene. There is a long pause.)*

TOM

Where are you? *(WIND CHIME.)*

BARBARA

Near. Near you.

TOM

I can't see you. I want to see you.

(WIND CHIME. BARBARA remains in dim light, never leaving her chair. The light from the fire brightens when she speaks.)

BARBARA

You're close. I think you're very close. The space between us is not as great as I used to think.

TOM

Can I touch you?

(HER voice is losing the "surf" quality, becoming normal.)

BARBARA

I don't know, Tommy. I don't think so.

TOM

(Sadly) Oh.

BARBARA

But, I think . . . maybe you can . . . I'm sure you can . . . *(HE reaches out a searching hand.)*
 . . . If you do what I ask you.

TOM

Anything.

BARBARA

Throw them in the ocean.

TOM

(Groans, arms falling) Ohhhh.

BARBARA

In the ocean, Tommy. As you promised.

TOM

Oh, Barbara . . .

BARBARA

(More insistent) As you promised me, Tommy.

TOM

Oh, don't. Please don't ask me to do that.

BARBARA

It's what I want. That's why I'm here.

TOM

Oh, Barb, I had to promise. I didn't want to.

BARBARA

Had to? What do you mean, "Had to"? You didn't have to.

TOM

Honey, you were in pain. Such awful pain. I would have promised anything.

BARBARA

(As if it were a brand new word) Pain? Oh, yes . . .

TOM

So I did. I just said it. I didn't mean it.

BARBARA

You didn't . . .

TOM

You knew how I felt about a family plot.

BARBARA

(Her laugh rattles the wind chimes) Oh, yes! You actually wanted one.

TOM

Yes. Yes, I did. I still do.

BARBARA

I forgot all about the pain.

TOM

That was no time to argue, so I just promised . . . I'm sorry, what was that?

BARBARA

I forgot about the pain.

TOM

You did?

BARBARA

I'm not quite sure what it is.

TOM

Wow, that's . . . That's wonderful! That's the best thing you could have said. That's Oh! Hey, do you know that today's your birthday?

BARBARA

It is?

TOM

Yes! June thirtieth *(Or substitute today's date)*. You forget that, too?

BARBARA

You forget a lot. You'll see. But I didn't forget your promise. I remember that very clearly.

TOM

Yeah. Well, I'm really sorry about . . .

BARBARA

Tom!

TOM

Yeah?

BARBARA

Enough. I want you to do it.

TOM

I know. I know. I tried, honey, I really tried.

BARBARA

Try again.

TOM

That's why I'm here, you know. Because it's your birthday and I knew that was what you wanted. I just . . .

BARBARA

So will you do it? Please?

TOM

I came down here. . . I tried . . . and I. . . (*shrugs*) I just can't.

BARBARA

Of course you can.

TOM

Well. . . . I won't. (*SURF SOUND*)

BARBARA

Won't?

TOM

No, I won't. I can't just throw you away!

BARBARA

Tom . . .

TOM

I know. I know what you're going to say.

BARBARA

Oh, yeah? "It's only ashes? A little carbonized calcium and such? It isn't me?"
Is that what I'd say?

TOM

(Shouts) Yes!

BARBARA

Well you're right. So answer me; just why are you saving this box of old clinkers?

TOM

Because they're YOUR clinkers!

BARBARA

Well that's right. That's exactly right. They are mine and I want them thrown in the ocean.

TOM

No! *(Near tears)* No. *(A long pause while the SURF SOUND fades up, then down.)*

BARBARA

(Carefully quiet) Please?

TOM

(Shakes head) I can't.

BARBARA

It's just a simple little thing

TOM

Not to me.

BARBARA

Oh, Tommy. Come on now.

TOM

It's all I've got!

BARBARA

If you loved me, Tom, you'd do what I ask.

TOM

And if you loved me you couldn't ask it.

BARBARA

You don't get it, Tommy. You just don't understand.

TOM

I guess I don't. Look, I went along with your quick-cremation thing, didn't I?

BARBARA

Yes.

TOM

Didn't I?

BARBARA

Yes, you did.

TOM

I let them burn you to cinders. I let them turn you into this. I didn't want that.

BARBARA

I know.

TOM

And I still don't want that.

BARBARA

I appreciate that, Tommy.

TOM

Well, it sure doesn't feel like it.

BARBARA

Oh, I do! Of course I do. That was very hard for you.

TOM

Yes, it was.

BARBARA

And of course I appreciate it.

TOM

I wanted a wake and a regular funeral.

BARBARA

Yuck! I know.

TOM

(Shouting again) Well, I didn't get it, did I? So let me have this, all right? A little hole for the ashes. A little marker for the plot. I won't throw you in the ocean. *(Pause; OCEAN SOUND.)*

BARBARA

You know, Tom, you're some kind of weird old ash collector. Those ashes are so unimportant, believe me.

TOM

It's not the ashes that are important. You've never understood this . . .

BARBARA

So what's important then?

TOM

The place. The PLACE is important.

BARBARA

(An abrupt laugh) Hah! There you are! “Location, location”, that real estate thing.

TOM

Stop it! *(Beat)* Look; on my way here, I passed the cemetery . . .

BARBARA

You mean the compost pile? *(Laughs at her own joke, causing the CHIMES to SOUND.)*

TOM

Stop it, I said. Just stop that!

BARBARA

Sorry. Sorry. It is pretty funny . . .

TOM

God! Look at me! I’m standing here on a cold beach in the dark, arguing with a dead person who doesn’t know what’s good for her.

BARBARA

I do so.

TOM

You don’t. You really don’t.

BARBARA

Do so. *(Pause.)*

TOM

Look; I’m doing this for you!

BARBARA

Hah!

TOM

Listen. At the cemetery there was a family . . .

BARBARA

Fascinating.

TOM

(Ignoring her). . . five or six people. Young and old. Surrounded by gravestones and markers. And in spite of what you think, they weren’t discussing ashes or any other bodily residue.

BARBARA

No? So what were they doing?

TOM

Laughing.

TOM

No you don't.

BARBARA

No?

TOM

No. (*SURF SOUND*)

BARBARA

You're right. I'm missing something.

TOM

You're missing the point.

BARBARA

Which is. . . ?

TOM

Those people were warming themselves with family memories. The older ones were passing them to the younger ones. Those stories tie that family together through all the generations. It's ancient, for God's sake and it's wonderful.

BARBARA

And you say they were laughing?

TOM

Sure.

BARBARA

Well, I guess I get it, Tom, but I have to tell you; they don't have to do that in a grave yard.

TOM

No, of course they don't *have* to, but the grave site is a good place for it. It's a place where the living can gather, surrounded by their history; where they can retell the old family stories. It doesn't matter if their bones are there, or ashes or whatever. It only matters that it's their place. It's the family's holy place.

BARBARA

Ah! There it is! There you go with that.

TOM

What? There I go with what?

BARBARA

The "place", the "place". It's your place thing, your territory thing!

TOM

Oh, come on!

BARBARA

It's a place, Tommy. Like your own little country.

TOM

It is not. *(Pause)* Well, so what if it is?

BARBARA

It is! It's a tiny grassy country with markers and fences. Fences! Only the living do that. You draw lines around a place. There's my side, there's your side. You can come in, you stay out. We dead don't make those distinctions. No, we're everywhere and we love being everywhere, but you people; you can't seem to live without your circle-the-wagons attitude. Tommy, listen; borders keep more people out than in.

TOM

Oh, come on, will you, it's just a . . .

BARBARA

Place! It's a place with a fence around it.

TOM

It's a— a SPOT! A nice little spot where once or twice a year the living and the dead can kind of . . . interface.

BARBARA

What? What's "interface"?

TOM

Connect.

BARBARA

Oh.

TOM

Yeah. All those old gravestones connect the living people to their ancestors and vice-versa. I want that, too. That *connection*. What's wrong with that?

BARBARA

There's nothing wrong with it, Tommy, but there is something missing.

TOM

Yeah? What would that be?

BARBARA

The rest of the world.

TOM

Oh, come on.

BARBARA

The whole rest of the world, Tommy. You don't see the big picture.

TOM

Oh, I don't, huh?

BARBARA

Being committed to one place separates us from all the other places. You'll see that when you get where I am.

TOM

Like when I grow up, huh?

BARBARA

You just don't understand.

TOM

I guess not. I guess I don't. A place makes me feel closer. Look, I'll see beyond those ashes and the marker.

BARBARA

And then you'll remember me?

TOM

I'll remember us. Us! That's what it's all about, isn't it?

BARBARA

Yes. Like this? (*WIND CHIME*)

TOM

Wait. I know what that is. It's the . . . uhh . . . The damn whatayacallit from outside our window. It's like your laugh.

BARBARA

It is?

TOM

Sort of. Yeah.

BARBARA

Oh, thank you. It's the wind chime.

TOM

Right! The wind chime. We used to hear it from our bed.

BARBARA

Yes. And do you remember this, Tommy? (*WIND CHIME*)

TOM

I still hear them every day. (*Sniffs*) . . . Oh.

BARBARA

Yes?

TOM

That smell . . . (*Bursts into tears*) Ah!

BARBARA

Yes.

TOM

It's soap It's your bath soap. (*Getting control*) Oh, that took me by surprise. That was a little cruel, Barbara.

BARBARA

Sorry. But you remembered, didn't you.

TOM

Sure. Why did you do that?

BARBARA

Here we are on the beach, yes?

TOM

Yeah.

BARBARA

No fence, no grass, no grave stones, no borders of any kind?

TOM

(*Nodding*) I see.

BARBARA

And did we "interface"?

TOM

Indeed we did.

BARBARA

So you take my point.

TOM

Yeah (*Pause*) Yeah. (*SURF SOUND. Pause.*)

BARBARA

So you'll do it?

TOM

Yeah. I'll do it. When you're right, you're right. (*SURF SOUND*)

BARBARA

Thanks, Tommy. Now I'm going to do something for you.

TOM

Ok.

BARBARA

First; I'm going to get a much bigger monument than the one you were going to buy for me.

TOM

Are you saying I'm a cheapskate?

BARBARA

Second; you're going to understand something really important. No you were never a cheapskate. And three; I think we can touch, just a little, from now on.

TOM

All right. It's a deal.

BARBARA

It's a deal.

TOM

OK . . . Here we go.

(SURF SOUND grows as TOM takes carton and walks down to the center apron where he stands unmoving. SOUND continues. Long Pause. Then finally...)

BARBARA

So do it.

TOM

All right! *(TOM opens the carton; hesitates.)*

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes