

The Love Song of Langley Moran

Fiction by Wayne Scheer

"I'd be happy if I were just pissing away my life," Langley Moran told his wife as they prepared for bed. "Instead, it's passing in dribbles and squirts. I'm like an old man with a prostate problem."

"Then get it checked. Do you want me to make an appointment with Dr. Levy?" His wife continued combing out her hair.

"No, no. My prostate's fine. It's my...Never mind."

She felt guilty not paying attention to him, but lately it was difficult to know when he was speaking to her or to himself.

"I'm a dinosaur. After thirty years with the same firm, maybe it's time for me to think about retire..."

"Oh, don't let me forget. Phyllis Ramsey left a message when I was out today. She and John want to get together for dinner this Saturday. We talked about it earlier."

"Talked about what?" Langley had taken off his clothes and was disappointed Agnes hadn't even noticed him standing naked before putting on his pajamas.

"I'm talking about dinner with the Ramseys. Don't you listen?"

"Oh yes. Dinner with the Ramseys."

"It's our turn to choose the restaurant. Perhaps Marcel's? They have a lovely poached sea bass. You had the chicken breast stuffed with crabmeat last time. You thought it was a bit dry."

"Fine. Dry chicken sounds good."

"We could go someplace else."

"Why bother?" Langley crawled into bed as Agnes applied cream to her face.

Already awake, he turned off the alarm before it rang at six the next morning. Agnes had kicked the covers off herself during the night and her nightgown had ridden up exposing her rear end. In the glow of the morning light, he recalled how excited that sight once made him. He slipped out of bed, covering her quickly with the blanket.

She offered to put up the coffee.

"No need," he said, looking forward to the time alone.

He felt odd this morning, acutely aware of his every move as if he were an actor playing the role of a man brushing his teeth, showering, shaving and carefully combing his hair from one side to the other to cover his bald spot. Dressing in a dark blue suit and white shirt, he thought of putting on the brightly colored tie their son had bought him for Christmas, but reached for the modest blue and maroon striped one instead.

Langley stared at his reflection in the mirror, stifling the urge to weep.

Instead, he thought of his son, his two daughters and his grandchildren, a thirty-two year marriage and an impressive title at work—Director of Research. He was a comfortable man in a comfortable life. Why, then was he unhappy?

Happiness isn't measured in years married or titles, he thought. His children made him happy but they followed jobs to other parts of the country, and he saw them only occasionally. Agnes once made him happy, but they hadn't

laughed together in years. Sipping coffee at the kitchen counter, he tried remembering the last time they made love.

His work was all he really had, and it bored him. Yet, the thought of not leaving for the office each morning scared him senseless.

He sipped his coffee, imagining what he would do if he had the strength to act on his impulses. Would he tell Agnes he never stopped loving her or would he walk out of the house and never look back? Would he put a gun to his head?

Agnes padded barefoot into the kitchen, her loose robe exposing part of her breasts. "Coffee smells delicious," she said, as she poured a cup. "How'd you sleep?"

"Just fine." Langley looked at his wife. Even without make-up, she was still attractive. He stared at her face, glimpsing the girl he married and recalling how afraid she was after giving birth the first time that her breasts would never again be round and firm.

"I'll sag like an old washerwoman and you'll lose interest," he recalled her saying. Langley wanted to tell her how much more beautiful she was now, how much more sensual and womanly her breasts were.

More than anything, he wanted to share with her how afraid he was. But he didn't know how to begin. Would she understand?

They had met in college. Back then they spent hours discussing poetry, arguing politics. Langley remembered his dream of writing a novel based on T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." He would tell the story of a middle-aged man who sees himself as others see him, and although profoundly disgusted at the sight, is too set in his ways to do anything about it.

Again, the urge to weep nearly overwhelmed him.

Langley felt Agnes take his hand. "Are you all right? You've been so distant lately."

"I've been measuring my life with coffee spoons."

"What?"

"It's a line from..."

"Prufrock."

"You remember?"

"Of course I do, Lee," she said, using the nickname he hadn't heard in a long while. "Of course, I do."

He wasn't sure what to say.

This was his chance to tell her...to tell her what? That his life bored him? That she bored him? That he wanted to do something daring. Something unexpected.

"What?" he imagined her asking. "What do you want to do? Do you want to quit your job? Travel? Climb mountains? Take up with a younger woman?"

He tried picturing Cheryl, his new assistant. She was young, attractive. He was surprised how long her hair was when she let it down at her desk the other day. But Langley knew she saw him as an old man, a sad old man.

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas," he mumbled.

"What's that, dear?"

"Nothing. Marcel's will be fine, Agnes. Be sure to call Phyllis and make arrangements." With a sigh, he added, "I think I'll give the chicken another try."

