

A Small Ceremony

Bernice Morgan

A member of the Newfoundland Writers' Guild since it was formed in 1958, **Bernice Morgan** began freelance writing in the 1960s. She edited the bulletin published by the Newfoundland Teachers' Association for several years. She was born and lives in St. John's. She has been both a student and a teacher of creative writing, and her themes are primarily of relationships, conflict and survival. She has won several awards in the provincial Arts and Letters Competition. For a time she worked in an office at a university residence, which inspired the story "A Small Ceremony". It first appeared in the literary magazine *TickleAce* in 1984.

The ambition to better oneself is a very human quality. If one is fully integrated into the new life, all is well; but one may find that it is not necessarily true that when a door closes, another opens.

He put the large flight bag and the briefcase out into the hall and started to lock the door. Then he stopped and with the tips of his fingers pushed the door open. He stood looking at the now empty room. Naked white book shelves, smooth, tightly wrapped bed, empty desk, empty window ledge (so recently cleared of two stale beers and a box of crackers). Not a speck of himself remained in the room.

Where then had he gone?

For surely this self who was leaving—this man standing on a doorstep in fawn drip-dry slacks and blue pullover, this owner of a Samsonite flight bag and leather briefcase containing (carefully folded in tissue) two certificates declaring to the world that Toma Dakannah was a B.Sc., and an M.D.—surely this man of careful vowels and shuttered eyes was not the same who had (despite his black serge suit and white shirt) danced around and around this room the first time he'd come into it over five years ago? Where then had the other gone?

He would have liked to walk across the room and scratch his name in the glass window, "Toma Dakannah was here!" He'd seen white students do things like that and wondered at their childishness—"Look on my works you mighty..." Was that what they had been trying to say too? But it was late to begin understanding white men. He shrugged, smiled at the empty room where he had been safe, and sometimes happy, closed and carefully locked the door.

He walked down the three flights of stairs to the residence office but did not meet anyone he recognized. The office was quiet and cool, the white woman looked up from her desk, "Yes?"

"I have come to return my key and pay my fees."

He watched as she flicked through the green cards; she did not find a name that matched his face for her and turned to him, irritation twitching across her mouth, "Your name please?"

"Toma Dakannah," he said very carefully, and spelled, "D a k a n n a h."

He thought the woman flushed a little and was glad—after five years she should know his name!

There should be some ceremony, he thought. But there is no ceremony.

He remembered the ceremonies when he left home. His teachers' long lectures when he'd gotten the scholarship—he must now represent all the other boys who had written the test and not gotten a scholarship, and their parents, and his parents, and his teachers. He must do his very best for all of them.

And his father's own ceremony—the long bus trip. In a rickety yellow bus that pulled away from their own civil servant neighbourhood, then through the tin shacks at the outskirts of town, away from the town itself and out across the flatland. He and his father rode half the day, dressed in their starched white shirts, their best dark suits gathering a fine powder of dust. Going to see the old man who was his grandfather. An old man in an orange cloth, who sat outside a whitewashed hut gazing at the far hills. His father had wanted some blessing, some sign that the old man approved, or at least recognized this miracle. His grandson was going to university—a foreign university. But the old man had given no blessing; no sign, no approval. He sat there smoking and looking out over the land he had once hunted across, a land he had stood in the centre of and thought endless.

After a while they left. The ride home was long and silent, but "He always was a stubborn old man," his father had said, with some pride, just before they reached their own stop.

Toma Dakannah counted out the change for the residence office woman, she pressed the right buttons and slid him the receipt across the black glass countertop—her fingers did not quite touch his.

He wished there was one person he could say goodbye to—he reviewed quickly the names of his teachers and classmates—but there was no one! No one he knew well enough to say, "I'm afraid."

"I would like three of these," he pointed to a display of garish postcards, showing the campus in winter, the blood red brick festooned with loops of snow and blue-black swirls of snow behind. "Thank you," he said and carefully tucked the cards into his case.

"I am leaving today," he told the woman behind the counter. She smiled hesitantly, not sure what comment was appropriate.

He would go to see his grandfather again. Maybe the old man would let him live in the hut for a little while—he would like for a time to sleep in a whitewashed house and to look out across the plain.

But even as he turned to pick up his suitcase he knew the thought to be mere fancy for him—there would be no nights in a cool hut, no days to sit dreaming over the flatland.

The old man had known that all along.