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Guard

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Guard

Robert J. De Smith

“Yes,” he told them,
“I was on duty that night.
Yes, I had fallen asleep.”

After all these years,
He could still muster a blush
When he told the story—
A Roman guard actually asleep at his post!

A guy could die for that, he knew,
But he had been given assurances.

The blush meant he almost believed it—
That outside Jerusalem one night
He and his detail had diced a while,
Talked about women,
Tended a makeshift fire
(He was proud of his ability to make
A fire almost anywhere out of almost nothing),
Sent a boy to town for wine and bread.

They told ghost stories, too:
They had been posted to a graveyard, after all.

Silly, really, guarding graves.
“What would we do if one of the
Graves really opened, yell
‘Halt, who goes there?’”
One of the young guards quipped.
He was spooked, though.

But they weren’t trying to keep anybody in,
They were keeping the living from the dead.
There were radicals around—
Who’d stoop to grave robbing to help their
Jewish cause.
Or so he had been told.

Oh, and the money was nice—
A life's savings, of course.
He had tended it carefully—
Didn't want to bring attention to themselves.
That was a family decision, or at least
His wife was in on it.

That cash had saved them many times over.
They 'd spent it wisely,
Making them look like frugal, steady folk;
It allowed them a little comfort
And a good doctor when their son took sick.
(He was fine, now, though deaf in one ear—
A younger version of himself).

Once in a while, he fingered the stash:
He was no miser, but he wanted to touch it,
To assess it, to remember that it was real.

It had dwindled over the years,
But it would never be used up.
It bothered him, though:
It was a lie, just like his
Whole life,
Which had been defined by that one night.

He'd done okay, but promotions were slow—
You know, it had to look right, sure.
So every once in a while he was called in
To tell the story again—

Yes, he was there.
Yes, he had drifted off—no excuses—
But there you have it.
He didn't see anything.

But he remembered light
And fright—
But also peace.

(continued on next page)

Did something,
Someone, step over him,
The linen, trailing from an ankle,
Burning as if it had been molten lead?

And he'd heard other stories,
Ones he was called in to refute.

Not a dead criminal, not just a waking ghost
(He didn't believe in ghosts!)
But a man alive.

As he fiddled with his coins,
"Wouldn't that be something?"