

Dust to Dust

by Michael Gillan Maxwell

He awoke with a start. Unable to go back to sleep he lay there in the dark with his eyes open. The pit in his stomach, brought on by anxiety and grief, made him realize he'd been putting it off for too long. He arose from bed in the silvery glow of pre-dawn to attend to the task he'd been avoiding.

He took the hand-painted earthenware platter off the wall, placed it in the middle of the table and flipped on the overhead light. The ebony boxes he'd made by hand for his brothers and sisters were lined up on the table. As he carried the black box in from the other room, he noticed how its weight surprised him. He opened it, extracted a sealed plastic bag and set it down on the table. Like a surgeon wielding a scalpel, he sliced the bag open with a razor and poured the contents onto the platter, taking care not to spill any. He began to chop the powdery substance and separate it into segments.

Using a wood carving chisel as a scoop, he divided the pile and distributed it amongst the containers, filling each one a little at a time. As each was filled, he sprinkled in a mixture of gold dust, frankincense and myrrh before sealing it and gluing the top in place. *The Three Kings had it right.*

As he scooped from the pile, he heard the “*clink*” of something metallic. Probing with bare fingers, he located a small, circular metal object, picked it out and wiped it off. It was a medallion embossed with his mother's name and the name of the crematory. He found it difficult to comprehend that this was all that physically remained of a person who had lived in this world for the past ninety years. A dizzying array of memories and images flickered across his mind like a sped up black and white newsreel. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

It was almost light. He took a deep breath, savoring the perfume from blooming lilacs that wafted in through the open window. The birds had begun their raucous morning chorus in the branches of the trees. He listened for a while, then resumed the task of filling the small urns, thinking about eternity.

