

Snug Books Writing Contest 2024

Adult 2nd Place

"Happy Hunting"

Fictional Short Story by William Smith

What a time for ear worm. Vintage pop music looping through limited chord progressions. Usually I find these moments mildly unnerving. Today my emotional palate is full force: sadness, wonderment, relief, emptiness. Even my sense of humor feels unusually elevated. Yesterday's service featured a mix of tunes from decades ago, most of them sailed past me. Today one persistent piece of nostalgia remains, one song with its repetitive chords staking their claim like a friendly but unwanted guest.

A big pane window offers momentary distraction; trees flushed with flat green leaves, a pale sky, a mix of cars in the parking lot. A robin bounces around the cement. Finds nothing worth the effort it takes off, landing on a tree not far from my rental car. Even from this distance it feels like our eyes meet. My thoughts return to tomorrow's flight home and getting back to the rest of my life.

The lawyer enters the room accompanied by a flood of pleasantries, condolences, and an arm full of paperwork and pens. We'd talked on the phone a few times last year and then again four days ago. His familiarity with the process was reassuring yet somewhat disquieting. Copies of this and that are pushed in front of me. There are checks to sign. Dying may be cheap for the dead; not so for the living. Let's conclude this business and get on with it.

"I just need your initials here, pages two and five. Last page, please sign with your full birth name."

A small sigh leaves me. Since I rarely use my full give name, having long ago adopted a shortened, less archaic version, I knew what this means. Friends, credit card companies, even the MVA, knew me as "Lou".

Since most attorneys won't object to making small talk while billable hours were still active, the next query is not surprising. "Ludwig, is that a family name?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so."

“Was your dad a fan of the composer?”

This familiar question could provoke a quiet sort of pain. Sometimes, channeling my inner jokester, a tempting response might be, “Sure. And maybe that explains why my brothers are named Wolfgang and Johann.” But today I’m no jokester. Besides I’m an only child. I shake my head, flashing a weak smile. “I have no idea where it came from. Never got around to finding out. Never got around to asking.”

“Well, then....” The attorney finds himself in a small, uncomfortable spot before quickly re-grouping. “I know you’ve got a key to your father’s house. As you know, the items bequeathed to others are already claimed. The remaining contents are for you to keep, give away, dispose of as you wish. I’m sure there are many memories to face. Some people find going through a family member’s possessions a comfortable way to bring closure. Others want nothing to do with it. They call a company, haul it all away, be done with it. I can recommend a few firms if you’re interested.” Grammatically this may have been a sentence, but I knew it was a question.

I gather the paperwork, my phone, and return his pens. All signs I’m about to make my move. The billable hours portion of our meeting was over.

“Thanks. I’ve called somebody already. They’re coming by tomorrow. I’m heading over right now. There are quite a few vintage vinyl records. He loved music, especially classic rock. ‘Dad rock’ I guess it’s called. There are also some family photos. Books. But mostly...”

My words trail off along with my thoughts. This was a man’s life, my father’s life, being summarized, concluded, disposed of. A pile of things, his things, are now my responsibility. As the last surviving family member it is now my privilege to pay for their transport to the nearest Goodwill. Whatever fails their standards, next and final stop, the dump. “The dump”: a cemetery for things. Such an endearing term.

Regaining the moment, “Mostly... I’m not sure there’s much.. much of anything...uh, We’ll figure it out. I appreciate your help. For everything.”

By now I am standing with my eye on the exit. The attorney rises sharing a surprisingly genuine smile “It’s common to hold on to some things we don’t want to let go of. We think we can keep on living as long as there is something to hold on to, to guide our memories. Some people hold on to more than others. Maybe they’re afraid of missing what’s important to them.”

Back at my rental car, a bird has deposited a sizable mess on the windshield. I suspect the culprit is my acquaintance from earlier. I fumble to find controls for the washer and wiper. After several attempts the windshield is transformed from “smeared” to “clear with a few tolerable streaks”. In between attempted cleanings, the attorney’s words return, “...afraid of missing what’s important”. “Missing..missing” Oh dear. That word triggers the return of the ear worm song, “... I’ll pretend something something, something something missing...”. Right. Time to get back to business.

As I arrive at the house I continue reminding myself I’m ready for this. Key in hand, I approach the front door. The lock provides little resistance. Will there be a burst of quiet nostalgia, an emotional tidal wave perhaps? Entering, it was as if I am watching myself meandering from room to room, figuring out what is next. This place doesn’t contain that many memories for me. It is clearly Dad’s place. I’ve been here maybe four or five times in the past twenty years, each time for just an hour or two.

There are half a dozen pictures of me scattered across rooms and hallways; wallet-sized school portraits in tiny frames, me in middle school orchestra sheepishly standing in the back row next to the bass drum. Dad always took an interest in my drumming, more than I did. I’d sensed he may have been disappointed I didn’t continue. During a visit two years ago he asked me if I still played at all. And my high school graduation with a peach fuzz mustache. Once upon a time I used to hate that picture. Today it merely provokes a reluctant smile.

I’d already given the permission to the children of one his friends to come help themselves. They were newlyweds and in desperate need for furniture. Would these scavengers have left the place disheveled? Fortunately such was not the case. As far I could tell only the living room set and several dining room chairs were missing.

As the walk through continued any expected dread never comes. The house seems to welcome me, pulling me toward the kitchen, offering me a drink. Why not? Go ahead, there are still a few cold ones in the fridge. Might as well. Certainly the guys coming by with the truck tomorrow won’t mind helping themselves to whatever is left.

As I refrigerator door opens Dad’s silent voice returns, ‘Care for a barley pop?’. The last few times I visited he would ask this way. Whatever its intent (cute? funny? edgy?) the wording failed me. His question would hang in air just long enough to give the brew a bit of a sour edge. Today it wasn’t so. The bitter flavor nudges a small bit of joy inside of me. I was no longer rushed. I started humming again. There it is again. Same tune. This time the lyrics begin to untangle themselves, “...and then while I’m away, something something home every day ...”.

Walking into the dining room there are already several boxes of photos, files, vinyl LPs stored in high-end plastic file storage units, old milk crates, cardboard cubes, all in different sizes, different levels of capacity use. I grab an extra chair from the corner. Spying a safe space for my drink, the last of my father's possessions in front of me, I resolve to stay on task.

The first two containers were quickly dispatched. These are the relics of a life already lived. Fossils basically. Even my parents' wedding guestbook I toss into the recycle pile. Four more boxes to go. There is a strong temptation to just stop now. I don't need or want any of his stuff. Yeah, I could admit it now, he led a good life. He did his best, did ok by me. There's no need to review his college transcripts, old letters of recommendation, or grainy Polaroids to find completion. I don't need his stuff. None of this changes anything.

Ok, one more box. Here we go, old picture frames... his college diploma... I pause at his parent's wedding photo. Any historical relevance here? Is this something worth keeping for posterity? Proud of myself, I capture it on my phone. Stay lean. No need to check luggage on my flight home.

Then it happens. Almost like the magician's set up; "pick a card, any card", I pull out a simple wood frame. The image arrives with a flash of recognition. It's an autographed picture of the drummer in that band. Its color, unlike the group's early black-and-whites and iconic lapel-less grey suits. He is dressed more casually, denim pants, long-sleeved shirt and a leather vest. The blue-inked autograph hangs just below the top cymbal. The picture was taken from the drummer's left side, the bass drum proudly bears the band's name in big block letters with the signature tall "T" in the middle. Just under the drum's top rim in lovely handwriting capable of making any penmanship teacher proud, appears the name of the drum company.

Ludwig

In that moment, both brief and enduring, I cannot breathe. My natural reflex is gone, taken from me. When it returns (notably with an exhale), breathing is all I am capable of. Is this some sort of a joke? Is this real? A drum kit? Faded pop music? From what... fifty years ago? Sixty? Did mom know about this? Anyone else? Too many questions roll in only to quickly fade away. A beast inside me has been kicked awake, reluctantly stirs and now ambles on without much fight. I smile, at least it feels like it. Speaking out loud, I declare to no one, "so there it is. Now we know." I take another swig of malty coolness. I tap my can on the center of the picture. "Groovy Dad." (Did I really just say that?)

The song, that song, returns. This time without hesitation the lyrics rise easily from my voice "and then while I'm away, I'll write home every day..."

Unleashed just enough, I stand up, step away from the table. An unsettled curiosity directs me back to the kitchen, down the hallway, finally toward the living room. I pull cord on the window blinds, exposing the front yard. The sky contains a bit more color than back at the attorney's. I watch a robin vainly poke the ground a few times before it takes flight, disappearing over an adjacent house. "Happy hunting little fella. Just please stay away from my car."