

Things Past

A blemished and bruised birch dining room — four straight-back chairs, a drop-leaf table, and a sideboard. Two polished cherry night tables on either side of a concaved double bed. Photos in gilded frames — a butterfly collection. Matching iron floor lamps with large yellowing shades balancing on their tops, standing sentry astride misshapen cushions on a plush red sofa. Threadbare wool rugs stained with dark puddles of browns and maroons — tragic blood spills. Remnants of an ancient woman. A barren rosary matron — the end of a mold, the last Latin prayer. Ninety-three. Birthed before the Great War. The aroma of rations and genocides as familiar as pumpkin pie. Sixty way before King went down. No mind to Vietnam, the moon, or TV.

Whitney perspired the sweet sweat of the three-shift mill. Out ten years before Joshua tumbled the Jericho walls. Their home for fifty-three years, then her home, then empty — a forlorn conch shell turning in the surf.

Heart failure. The aisle of St. Michael's. Iconographic walls. Communion on her tongue. A Hawthorne veil. Fifteen years of mornings. Sparsely peopled daily masses. Monsignor Gerard's faithful parishioner. Mute to clergy.

Great-niece Gladys in California. Dorothy's funeral '87. Both cloaked in black. Mortality of a grandmother and a sister. Lighting red votive candles for a quarter. Even then, a time screaming allegiance, only pleasantries. Platitudes at a solemn

moment. No beside-the-hearth soul mates. Thus, with the great-aunt now dead, great-niece long-distance to lawyer: Noninvolvement. Nothing worthy.

The least expensive urn. The archaic estate as one package. Ashes on the mantel. A real-estate auction. Five bids. Three from realtors. They offered the highest bid. A young couple from Indiana. Newlyweds. Their first home. They required furniture, pots, pans, towels, sheets and all the articles of a new couple. Progenitors of tiny families. Many in unkempt graves — snow-covered weeds. Survivors in duplex ranches. Chevys on blocks.

He — a bootstrap man. She — a wolf. From dead-end signs on one-way streets, to wedlock and mortgage. A perfect match.

The lawyer's profits — Christmas toys to toddler twins.

Gladys' profits — trifles squandered on Vegas slots.

Later, paper work complete, they possessed. A Ford pick-up, rusted-out side panels, no tailgate, hauled everything in one load. It didn't rain. Johnny Cash cassette.

Three rooms up. One bedroom — the spare: a single bed overlaid with a rag quilt, wood-plank floor, no closet, no lights. Another room — storage: bundled Betty Crocker monthlies, Reader's Digests, forty-three years of National Geographic; two

cane-seated chairs in need of repair; six tattered boxes holding holiday decorations, odd serving dishes, an Italian nativity set; in the corner, a treadle sewing machine. The other room — her bedroom: an eight-drawer mahogany dresser, scratched and dented, loaded down with vintage clothing — she found unmentionables in one drawer, another drawer full of cosmetics — large powder puffs, used lipstick containers, half-empty small bottles of inexpensive perfume: a matching highboy holding neatly folded men's undergarments and a cigar box sheltering a flexible-band wristwatch, four tarnished cufflinks, two jade string ties, a US Steel cigarette lighter, and a worn and dried leather wallet — driver's license expired fifteen years. Of the two polished night tables — in the drawer of one: a worn Latin prayer book; a Catholic Bible, black cover and gold-edged pages, many cornered and wrinkled; three rosaries, one simple and black, one cheap pink plastic, one of massive crystal blue beads on a silver chain; a small plastic bottle of water marked with a red cross; reading glasses; a magnifying lens; and a cinched stack of handwritten foreign letters — he thought German, she Croatian.

“Shouldn't we find someone to translate them?”

“Set them out so's we'll remember.”

On the night table. Moved to the highboy. Placed away. Maybe in one of those boxes. Forgotten.

Some neighborhoods are solidarity — posted community yard sales, page-boy kool-aid moms, July 4th block parties, salt-and-pepper improvement committees, Halloween popcorn balls — the old woman's neighborhood was solitude. Cabana stalls on the windy beach. Anonymously quiet neighbors. Covert attached-garage entries. Air-cooling units buzzing aside sealed and tinted windows.

Employment hints: four old text books and a worn speller, some notes scribbled in yellowing tablets — her aids or stuff people garner? Not all that interested. Would not have noticed the books if they had not decided to bag the miscellaneous scrap and set it as garbage.

“Too much old crap around here.”

So they settled into her house — Maine men in Jefferson. They lounged on her furniture, fucked on her bed, sent away her clothes in black garbage sacks collected by smelly strung-out Volunteers of America hipsters.

Most everything else — her tattered Bible; her spectacles; her toiletries; her strongbox and checkbook; her junk drawer full of ancient keys, broken pencils, and trinkets; her bundles of old periodicals; her ceramic and silver thimble collection — tossed. Used tissues.

They kept: the worn furniture, the amateur oil-prints, the kitchen utensils, the yard tools, the tatting, the antique chest of quilts, the chipped wedding china, the dusty bottle of Italian wine from the basement.

The crucifix above the bed left its image on the wall. Removal necessitating new paint.

She: “Put it back.”

He: “Too weird.”

Like fallen Catholics at Christmas Mass, they kept.

He: “We’d catch it if the trash guys found out what it was.”

She: “It would be a really bad thing just to throw a person away like that.”

One night, after work, three rungs on the paint-speckled step-ladder, he slid aside the cover, opening the cavern of the small, unfinished attic. Atop dusty insulation, he bedded the urn.

She cooked ham. He was hungry.

After a year, everything really seemed theirs. The tombstone, they never rolled back, resurrection never considered. She, like erased poems from the blackboard, obsolete.

They had used her dishes so many times; cooked so many meals on her stove; replaced her food with theirs; carried their passion to her couch and even once to her kitchen; replaced her television with a color set — its glow was their aura in her living room — a Jesus halo on Peter; mowed her grass with her lawn mower; raked her leaves with her rake; used what she was to such an extent that even that winter, not even the snow remembered upon whose house it was falling.

Survival the first year — minimalistic. He not the type to hold a job. She not the type to find one. Nonetheless, and out of loneliness, they accepted the invitation to an acquaintance's' New Year's Eve celebration — crystal finger bowls from an embassy,

ornate Mandarin peace characters etched throughout. Accepted with vague wonder and skeptical inclusion.

That night, a bottle of low-priced zinfandel and a Christmas cigar — a toast and smoke rings. Another glass: love-making in front of a twinkling Christmas tree, a few strands of silver tinsel in her hair — a microcosmic ticker-tape parade, a seraphic blessing.

Uneasy and awkward, they rang the bell of the flaking and forlorn duplex; he without tie, she without skirt — ragged jeans, concert tees and denim jackets. Liquor, merriment, pills and dope, midnight love-kisses.

Four a.m., the couple, tipsy, smiling — infants in the predawn — headed home. Reviewing drunken episodes, laughing about the middle-aged glory boy — old college blues-man, strung out on coke and working the women.

He seriously: “Did he work you?”

She casually: “He worked all of us.”

He changing color.

She quietly listened to the train far down the track, gently humming, churning closer and closer, humming turning to grumbling, until the whistle blasts sleep awake.

He hurling innuendoes and insults — flagellation.

The car on ice. A light pole and a median. Resting finally — Queequeg's coffin.

Three months. The old woman startled by the noise. The paint-speckled step-ladder banging on the stairs. Tombstone rolled back. Her eyes slowly adjusting to

the unnatural light flooding her mausoleum. A husky hand now in her hallowed hall. An inexpensive urn, then another — haphazardly dropped on the dusty yellow insulation. The garret receded to night. Sounds of the step-ladder carried to the basement. The smell of honey-glazed ham.

She paused until she could hear new snowflakes gathering on the roof before asking their names.