

A LIVING

My father made his living gutting houses. Copper, aluminum, brass, nickel, tin. Lead and bronze. A concrete floor will be veined with steel, and the steel will fetch a good price. In smaller quantities, gold, silver, platinum. These are found in the derelict mansions. It is a tedious assignment, though, like mushroom hunting. Plucking a gold-plated faucet from the wall, gathering the doorknobs. There will be imposters, alloys. Any fair merchant will only deal in unalloyed metals. If you mistakenly throw an alloy on the pile, he will turn you away forever. My father never made this mistake. He did honest work.

My father studied engineering, but there was no work for an engineer.

I was born in lean times. I don't remember, so I go by how my father tells it. He tells it:

The expense of heating and illuminating a house grew enormous, untenable. People did without water indoors. Then heat. A luxurious utility. Electricity went last. Finally, a person will not endure shivering stinking in a black house.

They left, abrupt as birds. (I don't remember the great migration, I was too young.) They went south. They went west. The houses sat. The houses filled with rot and rats.

Most everyone, my father tells it, locked the front door. A quaint habit. A sentimental gesture. But they must have known they would not return. He would go in through the windows.

He worked alone. He was sometimes unnerved by the empty houses, eerie, echoing. Moss creeping across the floors, a damp green carpet. Rosettes of black mold unfurling on the ceilings.

Once, he came across a golden deer in a dining room, sniffing the lace curtains. More often, he found the lice-livid sleeping bags and piss-pots of squatters. The squatters were skittish as deer. They made themselves scarce when they heard his work-boots on the stairs.

By the time I came up, the houses had been picked over. There is no money to be made in it anymore. I had to find work of my own. My work is not so different from my father's.

I rise at seven. Shelly sees me off. She stands on the porch, holding the door open with her hip like she's putting out a cat. Then she will carefully wash her hair and go back to bed. She sleeps all day.

I pick up John Jr. We are partners, but since I provide the truck, we split our earnings sixty-forty. It is a fair deal. With gasoline, sometimes I barely break even. Sometimes I get the raw end. Also, I'm the one who found a merchant to take our goods. A small scrap yard, a colleague of my father. The merchant doesn't even speak to John Jr., just to me. And John Jr. doesn't live with a girlfriend like I do. He lives with his mother and sister.

We bring out the map of the region. We pick a new site. It is deep in the country. John Jr. has a thermos of coffee. As we drive, John Jr. says, I have a good feeling. I think we'll find something today.

It is a small country cemetery, hemmed in by a black fence. We must be prudent. We spend time reading the stones. The older the stone, the more likely it is that we will find silver locket and thimbles, gold fillings. (Around 1850, fillings ceased to be true gold. A cheaper crown was made of zinc, mercury. Later, ceramics. Worthless to us). There might be lead bullets, diamond engagement rings, bronze buttons. Under fresher stones there are mementoes, garbage. War medals (forged from the cheapest materials), toys, photographs. With luck, a pair of false hips made of stainless steel, or a gun. But it is not worth the trouble. We choose Gregory Carver, 1793-1820.

We spend all morning on Gregory Carver. It is muggy, the digging makes us sweat, and then the mosquitoes come. When we finally get to the casket, it is a simple wood box, without ornament. I swallow a miserable sob. All this for nothing. There is nothing much inside but the smell of spoiled meat.

John Jr. looks in the pockets of the rag that clothes the bones and finds some coins. Some silver dollars and some one-cent Fugio coins, one hundred percent copper. John Jr. is excited, he has an interest in coins. He is proud of his find, grinning like a dog. His arms are black with mosquitoes. A sleeve of mosquitoes.

Sure enough, the hinges of the casket are brass, so we take those too. It's something. We fill the hole and break for lunch.

There will be only time enough to open up one more grave. I decide on Mary Alice Bishop, 1734-1750. By now the muscles in my arms are trembling, so I rest. John Jr. takes over. He digs cheerfully. He seems to never tire. I watch the back of his head bobbing, big as a pumpkin. He call over his shoulder, I think we'll strike gold this time. I've got a good feeling. I pick up my shovel.

We wear gloves and masks. Grunting, John Jr. pries open Mary Alice Bishop's casket. The lid is undecorated and caked in mud. There is a rotten dress, thin as cheesecloth. The curling witch fingernails laid across the breast (an arc of bone). A catholic's cross. I inspect this, it has a precious kind of weight, silver maybe. I polish it on my pant-leg, give it a spit-shine. Silver, I'm sure of it.

But this is all there is. No jewelry, no trinkets. She must have been a spinster, or a zealot.

John Jr. squats over the pile of treasures, a beard of mosquitoes at his cheek. Even he sees this day has been a failure. We begin to close up the casket. We put both our backs in it. It is unusually heavy. I chip at the crust of soil on the lid. I call for John Jr. Come see. Lookit. Didn't you notice? Lead. The whole thing is lead. A lead casket. It must be two hundred pounds worth.

I do a quick multiplication in my head. The lead casket will make us a small fortune.

John Jr. hollers and jigs around. He makes a gentlemanly bow of gratitude to Mary Alice Bishop. He pretends to kiss her skinless hand. We are forever in your debt, ma'am, he drawls. Then he claps me on the back and says, Good eye! You've got a good keen eye. You could spot a needle in a sack of shit.

It is getting late, so I sober up and give John Jr. instructions to clear out the box so we can move it. Meanwhile, I'll dig a berth around the casket so we can pry it loose with our shovels. Something like tearing a tree out by the roots.

His jaw hangs dumb. He doesn't understand. I tell him, We can't bring the casket to the scrap yard with the bones in it. This had not occurred to John Jr. He wears a sickened look. He wants to know what will be done with the bones? It's a reasonable question. I can only come up with throwing her back in the pit and covering it up again, good as new.

Look now, John Jr. says. Look here, he says, we can't just throw her back. It's disrespectful. I know it doesn't matter to you, but I'm religious. I just can't do that. I ask him what he proposes we do. I hear it: I sound mean.

John Jr. thinks awhile. Haven't we got a plastic bag in the truck? A garbage bag? That would be something. I root around the bed of the truck. There are no plastic bags, but there is some tarp. John Jr. happily piles the bones on the tarp, and makes a bundle and ties it tight. He tries to resurrect the festive mood but it is too late. The mood has been soured.

In silence, we carry the lead casket to the truck and fill the hole. Silent we drive to the scrap yard.

The merchant keeps us waiting almost an hour. We are insignificant. His peddlers bring him tons of metals, I bring grams. I lay trifles, a sandwich bag of gold fillings, on his desk. He sees me only as a favor. He appreciated my father's work. He's never asked where my wares come from. He pays cash.

At his summons, we haul the lead coffin into his office. I arrange the coins and the cross gingerly on his desktop. He appraises our wares with a darting eye. He says, Fine. As he weighs the coins and the cross on a little hand scale, I stare at his pale jowl, his ear. The black tunnel of his ear is filled with stiff filthy white hair, like a possum's wool. There is something hunching and possum-like about him. He catches me staring. In his appraising look is something like pity. It must be to do with the coins. It cannot be for us. For me.

He pays us and he dismisses us.

John Jr. blurts, bright and dumb, Thank you sir! The merchant snorts, without looking up from his task. A lean gray custodian comes to drag away the lead casket.

With my earnings, I buy a tank of gas and some canned food, a loaf of white bread, and a pouch of tobacco. The tobacco is a lavish purchase. A pouch for thirty-three dollars.

My father used to tell about when his cigarettes cost five dollars a pack, and a tank of gas cost an even fifty. Long ago in some romantic, abundant time.

Before I come inside, I undress and leave my dirtied work clothes in the laundry tub. Shelly isn't prudish about my work, but she can't bear to smell it on me. I wash at the outdoor spigot, and scour with castile soap. Where the soap suds fall off me, the grass is burnt yellow.

I find Shelly sleeping. Her hair is in two thick plaits, arranged on the pillow. She sleeps on her back, careful and stiff so she won't crimp the drying plaits. She is growing her hair to sell it. In another inch or so, it will fall at her hip, and she will cut and sell it. She has four sisters. They all sell their hair.

I wake Shelly, and she rises to fix supper. I tell her I've had a good day at work. She says, That's good, but she doesn't ask me about it. What's all this, she pauses, brushing her fingers across my mosquito bites, like reading a swollen Braille. I tell her we were in the backcountry all day and she nods. She says, Be careful. There are ticks out there too.

I want her to ask me something else so I can tell her about the lead casket, and we'll whip up a celebratory mood. There is some liquor in the cupboard, and the pouch of tobacco. We could celebrate it.

She is about to say something, but she begins to cough her deep wet green cough. She slumps in a chair to wait until it passes. The passivity of a consumptive. By the time the fit has passed, she is exhausted and has forgotten what she would've asked me, and I've lost the desire to celebrate the lead casket.

We eat dinner before the television and when we are done, Shelly lets down her hair and meticulously combs it into a silk rope. She sets it for bed. I watch her watching television: her eyes glaze over, like skin forming on a soup. She is gaunt and her complexion is dull. Only her babied hair is radiant with health. I think it is her boredom: she hasn't had work in almost a year. She applied for the clerkship at the gas station, but everyone wanted that job, and as soon as the manager heard her rattling cough in the tense interview, she knew she'd ruined her chance. With her cough she won't find work and without a job, she can't see a doctor. All there is for her to do now is wait. Wait for her health to improve and wait for her hair to grow another two inches. She is falling asleep, so we turn off the television and go to bed.

Before living with her, I could only fall sleep with the television on. She can only sleep in absolute silence. It is our only irreconcilable difference. I tried it her way, and she tried it mine. She found the babble unbearable, so now we sleep in a silent room. I found, in the compromise, a low throb, a single unceasing pitch. A hum. The hum grows louder and louder until it seems to rock the bed, to sit heavily atop my chest like a slab of stone. But Shelly lies asleep undisturbed, her hair prettily spread around her. I realized this was the sound of blood. Blood in the vessels, blood in the four chambered heart, blood in the mucid lungs, in the clenching gut, in all the vitals, even the obsolete appendix; blood in the thick vein that throbs in the throat, in the delicate fluttering veins of the eyelids, louder and louder, a single unbroken unwavering sound that will go on humming as long as I live. It is not a lulling or a sweet sound but now that I am used to it I cannot sleep without it.