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Casket Shopping

The casket I'd found for sale on Craigslist was out in Wakulla County, so my mother and I went to go kick the tires on it. We needed a casket for my father, but there weren't any in the funeral guy's catalog we could afford. My father was the only handy one and, had he the strength, would have fashioned one for himself. On the drive out, my mother kept saying, "It's just four boards and eight screws, don't you think you could put one together?" No, I thought, I could not. I couldn't do much of anything. Except for my ability to find strange things for sale in semi-obscure corners of the internet, I was of no use.

We got out there around six on a Sunday, the sky low with clouds and grainy like some rain was going to come. A couple of rat-like dogs tailed the van down the long dirt drive. More dogs joined them, and suddenly, we had a whole procession of ugly hounds yapping and barking and biting each other's scrubby necks. When we pulled to a stop in front of the house, my mother was afraid to get out of the car, but I knew at any moment, a man would emerge from the house whistling, clicking his tongue, and cussing until the dogs had all dispersed. These dogs knew they could get away with this behavior only for a very short time, so they were going to have as much fun as they could while they could. Sure enough, a round white man came out of the house and all the dogs ran into the palmettos, disappearing into those god-forgotten hollers.

We exited the car, and my mother shook the guy's hand. She was learning how to be like this, like a father, a woman who could deal with men without a man. Then, I shook his hand, meaty and damp. He smelled clean and stale, like raw meat. I was learning something altogether different.

We walked round the side of the house, and he opened up the woodshed. Inside was the casket, and it looked exactly how I imagined it: four

boards, eight screws, and a lid that curved like a body beneath a sheet. It was not smooth but rough to the touch and stained a deep purple. Something about showing us this embarrassed the man. He'd lost all color.

"I made it myself," he said.

"It's beautiful," my mother said.

"We thought my son was going to die," he said. "But then he didn't."

"Could I have a glass of water?" I said.

The man said, "Right when you get in is the kitchen."

I figured the transaction would be over soon. My mother did not haggle and, even if she did, it would be in poor taste to do so now, for something like this.

The house was cooled by a window-unit air conditioner I heard but could not see. I filled a glass with sweet, stony well water and drank it all in one pull. Then, I filled it again. The television was on and a children's cartoon was playing. I didn't notice the boy sitting on the couch until I was halfway into the living room. He startled me. Ironic, of course, being that I was walking into his house, drinking his water out of his glass. He didn't say anything, just regarded me blankly.

"Hello," I said.

Half his right cheek was caved with a puckered scar the size of my palm and his hair was missing in places where it would not grow back. I say he was a boy, but he might have been late teens or early twenties. He was frail looking and thin and above his lip were the partial remains of a wispy brown mustache, half of which had been consumed by the scarring.

"Do you want to watch the show with me?" he said.

I sat down next to him.

I craned my neck and could just see out the evening window my mother and the man still talking. The man had his right arm clutched across his chest while he gestured with his left. My mother listened with her head cocked and her fists balled against her hips. This is the pose

she made when she wasn't really listening but was instead preparing to speak. I didn't think I had much time left.

On the television, an animated squirrel in a spacesuit swam beneath a teal-blue ocean. On the coffee table were three plastic orange bottles. They were all full, they were all for pain, and they were all prescribed to "Sean." He opened one of the bottles.

"I'll get us some water," I said.

I went back to the sink with my water glass. The basin was crowded with dishes crusted over with the residue of meals. I hadn't noticed them before. Had they been there the whole time? Or had something shifted since I'd gone into the living room? I put some of the pills in my pocket. My mother called for me. I wiped out the water glass with the hem of my t-shirt and put it back in the cabinet.

"What took you so long?" my mother said.

I shrugged.

The man didn't say anything. He'd probably forgotten I'd been there at all.

The man helped us load the casket into the van. After, my mother counted out all the money, the agreed-upon price, and handed it to him. He took a look at it and then tried to hand it back. "No," my mother said and pushed the cash to him.

"It's only right," the man said. There'd be no one to corroborate his story. No one to know that he was trying to do the right thing for a soon-to-be grieving family. This was all coming from a place of kindness.

On the ride home, it rained. My mother strained over the steering wheel as the wipers wicked away the water and said, "He told me he accidentally shot his son."

A few years after my father died, my mother would tell this story at dinner parties and weddings, the punchline being that, while everything else about my father's death had been expensive, at least the coffin was free.

Later that night, in the garage, we watched my father climb into the casket and lay down and close his eyes and sigh. I can still hear that sigh. It rattles around my mind like birdshot in a boy's skull.