

Hope Chest

Ann finished packing up the Christmas decorations. Each year, a ritual; each year, a sense of loss. Red balls, green lights, a golden angel. The tree denuded. Needles cracked and fell to the floor.

At the bottom of the box, never cleaned out, needles from other years, other dead trees.

Ann taped the lid shut and took the box to the attic.

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Porch Swing

The old chain creaked comfortingly. Sara closed her eyes, felt Sam beside her, his arm around her, the night of their first kiss. The chain creaked as the swing swung forward again, and Sara heard the children laughing, shooting their marbles against the wooden steps.

Sara planted her feet firmly, pulled herself up on the heavy chain, nodded to the young family waiting. "One last time," she said.

She wandered through the house. The living room, Janey's room, Jimmy's...hers and Sam's. Sara touched the markings on the kitchen wall, each one a promise as the children grew that getting older was a happy thing to do.

She hurried back to the front door and locked it behind her one last time. She turned and handed the keys over to their new owners.

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Three Views of A Mother's Farewell

1.

Honest to God, I never expected this. Twenty years ago, I remember it clear, the doctor, he handed him to me. "A fine, black-haired boy," he said. Jesse'd go with me every Sunday to the Meetings, his little white jacket starched and pressed. Lord knows, I tried to raise him right. But he had his father in him. And a-sassing me always? he learned that right quick from the start. But no, I never expected it to come to this. He hit a home run when he was seven, he was so proud of that. I can still see his smiling face. You'd have thought the world was his that night.

2.

Well, Jesse, you finally done yourself up good, haven't you? Lying here, looking so peaceful. Even when you were a babe you had the blackest hair. You were a fine boy, went to Meetings every Sunday. You'd have thought you would've learned something there. But you had your father in you, there was no holding you back. Do you remember when you were seven? You hit your first home run. You had the world in your pocket that night. You should've seen your face. A smile stretching from -- no, I daren't touch you.

Jesse, Jesse, why'd you do it? A gun! My God, you killed a man! I don't know how you could have done it.

3.

Rose stood staring at her son. The pine box he was laid in was simple and unadorned with one small spray of white roses on top, the only flowers in the room. It was not much, but it was the most she could afford and she had wanted at least to do what was right for him. The funeral home had done a fair job cleaning him up. His face looked actually good. Peaceful, innocent, the way he might have looked had he chosen a different life. His black hair was combed to the right, making him look more like his father than ever. Jesse had had the blackest hair even as a baby when he was first born. He had always looked so angelic, she had thought, his black hair, his long

black lashes, dressed for church in his little white jacket. She remembered how proud he was hitting his first home run when he was only seven. He hadn't been against the world then. He had smiled, she stretched her hand out slowly to his lips, snatched it back quick before she touched him. She dug her fingers once again into the black shawl around her neck, pulling it tighter. Her lower jaw moved silently. But her eyes were black and stern. She had never shed a tear for him. She hadn't, not since she'd heard the news of what he'd done, robbed a bank and shot a man and killed him before they shot him back.

She stood staring at him a second longer then she turned and walked away out of the room.

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Hell After Death

'Mhere. Let me tell you about it. Life after death is pure hell. Believe you me.

You think you got it bad? Taxes past due? Crops a failure? Shoot the damn revenuer. He ain't nothing compared to this.

Or them aches in your joints, the right toe a-freezing up each time it rains or the wind's about to change? I remember them. Or about them. Ain't got no feeling here. And you call pain sufferin'? Least ways rheumatiz gives you something to concern yourself about yourself for a change.

Got a son? I did. Do. Cussedess durned mule-brained fool I ever knew. Never listened to a word I said. You think he does now? Hell! Got hisself all doozied up into those books of his, as if they could tell him a thing or two. Moved to the dad-burned city, become one of them high falutin' lawyers. Might as well be damn revenuer, s'all I gotta say.

He's got a wife. Pretty. That'll change. Like the rheumatiz. It comes in time. Just no get yourself up, take the garbage out, fix the sink. Not yet. He'll see.

And the babe? There's the one. Cute as a bug's ear, I would've said. Face of an angel, if there were such a thing.

She don't listen to me neither. Or see me. That's the worst of it.

Take yesterday. Touched the hot skillet when her mother wasn't looking. Burnt her little hand in two places. Couldn't stop her. She didn't listen to me, didn't see me. Hell, I knew about it an hour before it happened, and I couldn't stop her.

And seventeen years from now? five months, eleven days? She's got this little apartment, you see. Pretty little place, going to school, off on her own. --It's night. Two men break in, not even wearing masks. They open drawers, take her purse, cards, my wife's old ring. Her clothes are flung about. A lamp crashes, breaks, and she awakes. They see her, she screams, they have a knife, and they...they...

What they do to her! What they do to her!

I can't tell her.

What's the use of knowing, if I can't tell her?

I would take back the wife, the rheumatiz, taxes, life, hell, it all, if I could warn her.

I...don't know how.

Being dead is pure hell.

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Snapshot

"Watch the birdie!" Dad said, and we laughed. Years ago when I was very, very young, I believed him. I'd stare at the lens as the shutter opened, hoping this time I'd get a peak at the bird inside. Dad promised there was one. But the shutter always closed again before I saw it and Dad would have his picture.

This time the bird would be coming out.

Robby was on the other side of the cage, Mom behind me, Dad armed with his new Leica. "Whenever you're ready, Julie," Dad said.

I slid down the bar to the cage door, and Mom lifted the rear end of the cage slightly, coaxing the hawk out.

It stood a moment on the lawn, blinking in the sun, not knowing yet it was free. Dad had his perfect picture. Then the hawk ruffled its feathers, and shook its red tail. "Shoo!" Robby said, impatient as always. The hawk

squawked, it lifted its wings, I held my breath, the right wing lifted from its shoulder as straight, as high as the left. Early this summer, I never thought it would fly again when I found it in the garden, under our broken window.

Dad came over, hugged my shoulder, as we watched the hawk pause on the lamp post over the street. "We always have to let them go, Julie," Dad said. I shielded my eyes from the sun as the hawk rose into the clouds, and I nodded.

I'm glad its wing had healed as the vet had said. And I'm glad I didn't miss seeing it fly away. Next week, I'm going off to college.

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Give Them Wings

One of the hardest parts for a father to learn
After giving them that one last warning
Is to step aside and give them wings
So they can□ fly on their own
While you keep silent.

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Here are□ your first□ keys to the car, my Icarus.

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Butterfly at the Beach

two eternities
one
shorter lived
than the other

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