

## Another Time Capsule

Ed sat in his recliner, his torso rocking back and forth, and stared at his favorite photograph. His feet dangled off the end of the footrest, lifeless. Ice clinked a soothing rhythm against the sides of his tumbler as he swirled his glass and, for once, Ed felt no aches.

Like the rest of Ed and Ann's two-story house, the living room was sparsely furnished. A painting by Ann hung on one white wall, a violence of splattered colors framed in black. A cigar store Indian stood in the corner opposite Ed; its original colors had faded to a muted brown. Two photographs in ridged gold plating sat on opposite ends of the mantle. At left, Ed and Ann posed in pastel formalwear at their renewal of vows ten years ago, when they came West from Georgia; looking at it made Ed clammy. He stared at the other.

Reagan was one of the finest dogs to come from Royal Hounds; a greyhound fit to be shown, if Ed believed in such tom-fool nonsense. Reagan had followed the photographer's instructions with less sass than many human subjects might have shown. Now, the dog was gone.

Ed studied the cubes in his Ron Zacapa Centenario rum, a liquor that had come from some exotic place he had once been but could not return to. His stiff joints would no longer bear the beautiful ivory beaches. Thousands of miniscule bubbles dotted the ice cubes, living in forced immobility, until Ed freed them with the heat from his hands. He set the sweating drink on the lamp table, then ran his hand through his gray hair. The dampness from his hand was unsettling, and he quickly brought it back down. A few hairs came with it.

"Are you going to sit there all night looking at that picture? Come on, Ed, come to bed."

Ann stood behind him. Though her voice was dulcet, he cringed. He shifted his weight

to his legs, paused to see if they would hold, and rose with a grunt.

"I'm coming. I just need a moment to gather myself."

"I hate going to bed alone," she said. "I like to feel your warmth." Ann offered her best sulking voice, extending the syllable of every word like an irritable adolescent.

Ed had a hard time believing she was fifty-five and receiving the same senior discount he did at sixty-nine—his age for one more day. It was the same surprise he'd felt three years into their marriage when Ann turned twenty-one and began to buy alcohol.

Ed straightened and turned. His wife's petite body leaned against the kitchen doorframe, her eyes fixed on the floor. She no longer wore nightgowns; now that they had come to the Northwest, she wore the same flannel pajamas from the first leaf fall to the last violet bloom. Ed couldn't picture her naked body, though he imagined one firmer than his own. He'd read recently that Islamic law provided for a husband's sexual satisfaction, and a younger Ed might have demanded the same—had, in fact, on one or two occasions, he remembered with shame. But Ann wasn't quite so young anymore, and Ed didn't harbor the same urges.

"Ed?" She paused. "He's gone, you know." Ann's eyes rose to Reagan's photograph.

She said the words sweetly, bracingly, but Ed did not mistake the presence of something less benign. He scowled and looked at his drink. If she was trying to bait him, she would fail. "I'll see you in bed."

Later, after a climb up the stairs made treacherous by his arthritis, Ed lay beside his sleeping wife. There had been three fingers of rum in his glass when Ann called him to bed, and he needed both hands to climb the stairs, so he'd downed the rest. Now the rum was coming on. The sheets stifled him and he threw them back. He decided on his new Ethiopian blend for his morning coffee, then thought about the boundless hours to follow—every one of which would press upon him without Reagan to take to the park. His career had been an un-

ending stream of seventy-hour workweeks spent walking sweltering city pavement. He had hardly known what to do with himself when they moved to Falso, Washington to relax and ease his arthritis pain.

"Ha, ease my pain..."

Ann groaned beside him, and Ed tensed. Her favorite cousin lived here, Charlene, but Ed only saw her on holidays. Charlene was a mousy little brunette who reminded him of the innumerable squirrels in their neighborhood, a new development pressed up against the woods. Ed would have preferred moving to Santa Fe, or maybe Cody, Wyoming, some place with heat and character, with vestiges of the Old West. Here it just rained all the time, and his joints felt as bad as ever.

And his dog had gone missing, the second to do so. Reagan and his predecessor, Charley, both stayed outside because of Ann's allergies, and Ed had been careful to fence their backyard. Cougars roamed the woods, and people set traps. But with both dogs Ed had woken up to find a hole under the fence. Neither had come back or even been found.

Ann clutched at Ed's broad chest. She had—wore?—long, curling eyelashes, and her soft brown hair nestled in below her neck, relaxed. Her pillow showed a trace of rouge, despite the scrubbing Ann had done before bed. Her smooth cheeks inflated as she breathed through her mouth, sending puffs of hot air onto Ed's arm. He tried to inch away, but her arms held firm, and any resistance sent waves of pain through his body. He settled for bunching up the sheet in front of her mouth.

She had a surprise planned for him tomorrow. He hoped it wouldn't take too long. He hadn't checked with the Humane Society for two days. And Royal Hounds had left a message; there was a new greyhound, Edna, up for adoption. It was much too soon. Ann clutched at him again, and he gave up on returning downstairs.

At nine the next morning, Ann led Ed into the sunlight and toward a square black crate in a rear corner of their backyard. "Happy birthday!" She'd been awake since six and finished off a whole pot of tea.

Ed scowled. The squishing sound of their marshy lawn unnerved him, and Ann had let him finish only one cup of coffee.

Though the soft ground eased the burden on Ed's feet, moving forward felt as though he were walking in sand.

"Well, it sure dwarfs the other one." Ed studied the dewy surface of the massive plastic packing crate, already secured by yards of duct tape.

Ann tugged his hand and pulled him closer. "It's not every day you turn seventy." She stood on her toes and whispered in his ear, "And who knows if you'll make it to eighty!" She giggled, and her broad smile matched the sun poking through the clouds.

"So what's in it?" Ed asked. He shifted his weight between each painful foot.

"I can't tell you, you know that." Ann's smile stretched wider.

Her self-satisfaction irritated Ed. He considered dispensing with the ceremony and leaving Ann to bury the box herself. "It's my present, and you just said I won't make it—"

"*Might* not make it—"

"Fine, might not make it to eighty," Ed said. "And I still don't know what's in the other one you've—"

"*We've*—"

"*We've* buried out here.

She paused took a deep breath, as if recalling the start of a poem she learned in grade school. "We are placing a part of our present souls under the care of the earth, where it must

remain undisturbed—you therefore mustn't know which part."

Ann paused, daring Ed to interject, but he bit his lip and let her continue.

"Later, there may come a time when we find ourselves shiftless and adrift, and at that moment we will look to these capsules for guidance. For renewal—"

Ed tuned out the rest of her spiritual platitudes. It was all a part of some New Age philosophy she had found. He was convinced Ann was making everything up on the spot.

Ed tilted the crate first one way, then the other, divining its contents like a Christmas present. Ann had packed it well; nothing shifted inside. They lowered the box into the hole that Ann had sneaked off to dig the day before. Ed's knees creaked and his legs wobbled as he squatted, but they held.

Ed tried for a moment to clear his mind and simply smell the juniper surrounding him, but he did not feel like he was placing some part of his soul under the lock and key of the earth to be rediscovered—or simply discovered—at a later date. It was simply a chore, a punishment even, though for what he wasn't sure. Ed pictured Cool Hand Luke out in the prisonyard digging, digging, digging. But unlike that rebellious jailbird, Ed hadn't tried to escape. Maybe he ought to—it'd be something exciting for a change.

Why there had to be such a cloud of mystery was beyond Ed. What was the use of a time capsule if he didn't know what was being encapsulated? Ann presented today's burial as a birthday surprise, and he had to accept the gift graciously, but the first time capsule had not coincided with a birthday or anything else. Ann had suddenly felt the need to establish an accord with the earth. It was just like when she started feeding him fish oil for his arthritis. There was simply no telling.

After burying the box under a mound of soil, Ed allowed Ann to lead him by hand as they trudged back to the house. A few drops of rain pattered on their shoulders as they reached

the door.

"Timeliness is next to godliness, as they say," Ann said.

Ed wasn't sure that was exactly what they said, but let it go and stepped into the house. Ann veered toward the kitchen, and he hobbled to his chair. Only a few mud spots marked his khaki pants from the digging. Ed hadn't decided how many fingers of Centenario yet, but thought he had earned quite a few. For now, Ed just sat. Their chore had consumed more of his morning than he had wagered, so he could endure a few hours here until lunch. Then he would see about the Human Society. Maybe Ann would drive him.

Whatever pain he had felt after walking Reagan, these long, linking days of immobility and recline only intensified his suffering when he did try to move. He tried not to, and instead looked at the photograph on the mantle. Ed's right hand slipped down the side of his chair, but his fingers scratched at nothing. Today was the eighth day. Now he just had Ann.

She was gorgeous the day they renewed their vows. Her beauty still shone from the mantle photograph. They had chosen Easter for the ceremony, to symbolize the second life of their marriage out West, and had thought a pastel color scheme would enliven things. Ed found his baby blue suit downtown at a vintage store in thirty minutes. Ann had to drive the hour north to Seattle to find her dress. When she stood next to him in her pale purple gown, her brunette hair tied up into a nest, he felt the same cold feet he had had twenty-eight years before at their wedding.

But his feet were colder the second time around. They'd only been in town a month, and only Charlene attended the ceremony, as a witness. As pretty as Ann was—with hazel eyes that enraptured Ed (and, he was fairly sure, the priest), and skin the purest white, like sun-bleached sand—even so she no longer roused his desires.

And so it was now. Her brand of beauty, naturally stunning and made-up to be perfect,

was meant for a libertine. Those days were behind Ed. As his body failed him, physical intimacy was as much of a chore as digging a hole. He regretted that Ann still found joy in the digging and he could do nothing for her.

She was silent now in the kitchen, probably busy preparing his lunch. Ever since Ed's health had forced him to retire, she had taken it upon herself to fix his every meal. He hadn't eaten the same thing twice in months. It was the least she could do, she said. But Ed wished she would do less. It had been too long since he had cranked a can opener and tasted greasy chili that had those little oily bubbles on top that you could never quite mix in. Ann was working her way through culinary Europe, with the occasional jump to the Pacific Rim; North American fare wasn't even a blip on the radar screen. What was that she had served with last night's dinner? *Onigiri*? That wouldn't do for an old man.

Ed reached for a glass that wasn't yet there. He'd have to wait till after his *vichyssoise*. Ann's latest. She had seen Alfred serve it in a Batman movie, she had said, and if it was good enough for Bruce Wayne, it was good enough for Ed. But after Ann had explained—and spelled—the French dish, Ed could only think, *cold soup*?

Ed reclined further. *Superb Crosswords* lay beside him, and it was open to the puzzle, "Something Bothering You?" Ed tried to recline more, but the chair was already as flat as it would go. His hand again reached down to stroke the soft head of his absent dog.

"Ed!" Ann's voice trilled from the kitchen. "I'm going for potatoes. Do you need anything?"

He resisted asking for his rum, and said no. A few seconds later the door slammed.

Soon Ed's lower back tingled from its sloped position, and his arms chafed on the mealy upholstery. He rose and stumped around the house.

Several more of Ann's paintings lined the downstairs hallway, variously splatter and

landscapes, and small bookshelves filled intermittent niches. Shelves in the guest room and office supported more books, statuettes, empty bottles of Ed's imported rum. He felt surprise at each full shelf.

With the first capsule, too, Ed hadn't discovered anything to be gone. He had asked Ann for days about the box's contents, but she never budged, not even when he hid her makeup and jewelry. Ed had considered unearthing the box himself, just to see, but it hadn't seemed worth the effort, or the argument that would follow. It would have been better for one of his dogs to dig it up. Now the task fell to him. He thought he understood the fulfillment Ann received from her New Age spirituality, but could she expect him to hold the same appreciation? He appreciated frankness too much to hide behind philosophy. His pique grew as he failed to think of one secret he held from Ann, and rebellion surged inside of him. He would look in the time capsule.

Rain drove down, but Ed decided to brave the deluge. He collected his boots and umbrella and walked outside. Ed glanced at Reagan on the way for confidence, and he imagined that the dog urged him on with a wink.

Ed strode toward the lawn's back corner, ready to discover whatever LPs and Louis L'Amour books warranted such extensive secrecy. The rain pounded his umbrella for a few moments, then suddenly halted when he reached the burial spot. The two shovels still rested against the fence, and Ed took one; pain surged through his hands when he pushed the shovel tip into the soil. It was still soft, though heavy with water. The wet ground made a sucking noise as he lifted the top level of soil.

"Sounds something like Ann."

Half of an earthworm lay at the bottom of the divot he had just made. Ed remembered reading that they could grow back body parts, so he lifted it up with his shovel and set it

aside. He glanced toward the house occasionally, but kept working until he heard the shovel crack against hard plastic.

Ed knelt and brushed the remaining soil from the top to reveal the near cheval-de-frise of duct tape that Ann had wrapped around the box. He felt along the lumpy strips with their ridges and bubbles, then along the smooth edges of the plastic. It was cool and moist from the earth, and he let his hand linger, enjoying the wetness. But his legs were beginning to complain, so he dug into his pocket for his folding knife. He carved open the capsule with the care he had once used for whittling.

Finally the last strip snapped, and the box popped open. Pain shot through his left leg, and he shifted his weight to his right, but he did not rise. He kept his eyes on the dark interior of the box.

He planted his free hand to ease the pressure on his legs, and it sank into the mud. His fingers closed around something slimy. Half of a worm. He flicked it away then plunged his other hand into the box. Ed shut his eyes tight as his fingers pushed aside crinkled paper and packing peanuts, then touched something soft, dry, and rigid. Shock swept through his body, and it seemed to lock. There he stayed, on his knees, as moisture seeped through his jeans and up and down his legs. In the distance, a door opened, shut, but he remained rooted. One hand drove deeper in the mud as the other clenched fur.

Footsteps approached, but he didn't turn.

"Ed—" Ann breathed the word.

He felt his mouth open and close, like the feeder fish he used to see at the mall. He swallowed. "What about the other box?"

Ann didn't respond.

"It wasn't the cougars, was it?"

"Of course it was," she mumbled. "You don't think—"

He raised a mud-caked hand from the ground to silence her.

"You mustn't believe that I—" She stopped as Ed turned to look at her.

Tears ran from each eye. He felt as if his face were cracking.

"This is Reagan."

Ann tried a placating smile, but it faltered. "Yes, but—"

"This is Reagan!"

"There were cougars, you wouldn't have wanted to see it! You already feel so much pain—"

Ed shook his head; his whole body trembled. "Jesus, Ann," he said, finally pulling his arm out of the box. "Greyhounds never have been known for their digging."

Finding his footing on the muddy ground, he managed to right himself without Ann's assistance and made for the house. She called to him, but he didn't stop. Rain tapped on his shoulders, increasing with each splashing footfall. He stepped inside and locked the door. A half-full glass of Centenario waited for him by his chair, but he ignored it. He selected the key for the coupe from the basket on the kitchen counter and stepped out the front door into the rain.