

# Inheritance

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Some guy died who lived a couple of blocks away. We never knew him. He was old before we were even born. I think I saw him pushing a cart around the neighborhood collecting bottles. For *years*, but I'm not really sure. He wore a baseball cap all the time. And a green tee shirt. Even in the winter. But maybe it's someone else that I'm really thinking of. That's kind of the whole point.

Jean found his memorabilia in the trash. Boxes and boxes of it. She shows me an old photograph of him in his Army uniform. Isn't he handsome? she asks me. His wedding pictures. They look so happy, she tells me. I'm not so sure. Remember that wedding pictures are staged, I tell her. You can't trust photographs of special occasions, I add.

Diaries. There are forty years of diaries. Photographs and postcards pasted onto the pages. Seasonal lawn frogs. Children at progressive Christmases. Easters. Holiday cards. And postcards from Italy. Postage stamps with his small handwriting underneath them. He constantly writes needless commentary. Where this was purchased from, what it cost, how much sales tax. Dates of some of the pennies he's got. Only the pennies. And labels. There are lots of labels pasted into the diaries. And receipts. Never why it should matter or to whom. I yawn while I read, and not

deliberately. It's all utterly quotidian. Couldn't be more trivial. He has very clear handwriting. That's unusual for a man.

You can't throw this stuff out, Jean says furiously. This is someone's life. She's wood-shopping frames for some of the pictures. She's sent the diaries out to be rebound, the photographs to be digitalized.

*They* didn't care, I say. The stuff was on the sidewalk. They made a mistake, she says. People make mistakes like this all the time. People even leave money in the garbage. Valuable books. And their children always regret it later. And their children's children. Not everything people leave behind is intended to be valuable, I say.

We have no children, by the way. Maybe this is important. Maybe this is relevant. Jean is something of a pack rat. Maybe that's what's relevant.

Nothing here is *interesting*, I say. It doesn't have to be, Jean says, it's a life, it really happened. Nothing *really* happened, I say. Children, I say. He had children. A daughter and a son. He was in the military for a couple of years. During World War II he served in the only part of Europe where nothing was going on. He changed the lawn frogs each year all his life. He could only get plastic tinsel one year for his Christmas tree and he complained about it for weeks. No, change that. He complained about it for months. Around Christmas. Each Christmas from then on. He'd still be complaining about it if he were still alive. He complains when they change the tablecloths in his favorite diner. He doesn't like to feel plastic underneath his silverware. So fascinating, I

say. It's real—it doesn't have to be fascinating, Jean says. Wittgenstein ate the same thing every day for years, she tells me. *He* didn't. He ate different things each day. Right, I say. And all that's in the diaries too. Everything he eats. Every meal. Every snack. Every Twinkie. Because he wants to stay regular. And avoid Ex Lax. *Why* are we reading this stuff?

*Why* are you stalking us? the woman on the phone says to Jean. Jean has finally found names. A last name. Addresses. They live in Florida now. I'm not stalking you, Jean says. I found these things. I want to return them to you. You went through our *garbage*, the woman says. It's not garbage, Jean says. These are diaries. These are photographs. This is a life. I could make an art exhibit out of all of this.

There's a pause. Then: We're not helpless you know, the woman says. We know lawyers. I know how to sue people. I can call the police. I can get a restraining order. You can't blackmail us.

I don't think she understands, I tell Jean. What's to fucking understand? Jean says, what's wrong with these people? You don't know what you're getting into, I say. They threw the stuff out, didn't they? Maybe it was too painful to keep. We already know they're not like you. You're totally in guessing territory here. Anything goes when you're in guessing territory. These are other people's feelings you're dealing with. They don't work the same way yours do.

You've got to get out of your own head, I tell her.

Art, Jean says, I'm going to make it all into art. Collage, slides. Digitalize it all. Call it "A Good Life." Make him famous. Revenge, I say. You're just being spiteful because that woman lost it on the phone. Like, Jean says, good art can't have bad motivations? Look at Picasso.

None of this is *interesting*, I say. None of it. I've looked, you've looked too. It doesn't have to be interesting, she says. It's a life. I think: We've been here before. I try something new: Art, I say, doesn't art, at least, have to be interesting? And history? History isn't about *everything* that happened, is it?

We're talking to a lawyer. He's a nice man. He's sitting on our couch. This is two days after Jean called the woman in Florida. He's just finished leafing through a diary, looking at some of the photographs. There are seven boxes of the stuff, Jean says. Seven. I'm not trying to cause trouble, he tells me, I'm just a friend of the family who still lives in the area. She asked me to come by, that's all, he adds.

He says: I understand that she over-reacted when you called her. That she said some things she shouldn't have said. No one's going to sue anyone. She's not good on her feet, God knows, or with her head. She has to reach for her thoughts. She's asked me to apologize for her. She's really sorry.

Look, the lawyer says, people have a right to shed their past if they can. You can't do that, Jean says. Shed your past. That's just ridiculous.

The lawyer looks at her. Come again? He asks. I mean that you are a product of your past, she tells him. It's who you are. It's who you'll always be. Look, the lawyer says, this is all way too philosophical for me. The point is that people have the right to throw stuff out without repercussions. They have the right to say: I don't care. I don't want it anymore. This is gone, I'm going to make this gone. What about *him*, Jean says, doesn't he count? The lawyer sighs. Look, whether it's right or whether it's wrong, and who are we to say, *children don't have to care*. With all due respect, where do you get off deciding this for other people?

You do a good job, I say to him. You know, playing good cop *and* bad cop. Usually that takes two people to pull off. He gives me a pale smile. So, Jean says, you want this stuff back. No I don't want this stuff back, he says. No one wants this stuff back. I want you to throw it out again. This is what the family wishes you to do. I'm asking you to honor their wishes. Put it back in the trash where it belongs.

One year he couldn't get tinsel anymore, Jean tells the lawyer. For the Christmas tree, she explains when he looks at her. He had to substitute the plastic stuff. But it's just not the same. It doesn't hang off the branches the same way. It clumps together. It looks fake. It doesn't look like icicles. And that's the whole point, right? To look like real icicles. The lawyer winces. I just don't want to hear this, he says, nobody wants to hear this.