William Cass

Unfinished

My father died the night before my siblings and I were scheduled to fly in from our various locations around the country to celebrate our parents' forty-fifth wedding anniversary in Seattle. My mother called me about 4 AM. She said she heard him get up and then fall in a heap next to the bed. Heart attack, the paramedics told her. I, in turn, called my brothers and sister, and we all came home for a different reason than we'd been planning.

I stayed after the service and they'd all left to help my mother sort things out and make arrangements tied to his death. I was the oldest, divorced without children, and a teacher on summer vacation, so that made sense. We all thought, my mother included, that she was likely entering the very early stages of mild dementia. Her own father had declined badly with it during the last years of his life, and though not diagnosed specifically, the descriptions of his grandmother towards the end seemed to suggest a family history. I chased away thoughts about the likelihood of facing it myself down the line. My mother had recently become forgetful and had begun having a hard time organizing and completing routine tasks. But we felt she was still capable at that point of independently caring for herself. At least, we hoped so.

She was relieved to have my help contacting their lawyer, financial advisor, insurance company, Social Security, and the like. I helped her close or transfer accounts that held my father's name, cancel his driver's license, sell his car, things like that. It was while I was cleaning out his car for the new buyer that I found the first unfinished item that he'd left behind. It was a claim check for the dry cleaners dated the week before his death. I drove into town, picked up the clothes – mostly golf shirts and slacks on hangers under cellophane – and hung them in the back of his closet.

When I asked my mother what she wanted to do with his clothes, she shrugged wearily. "Take what you want for yourself, I guess," she said. "Same with his bureau drawers. Then bag up the rest and call Goodwill."

I did as she directed, but he'd been a much bigger man than me, so I only slipped a couple of his ties into my suitcase before gathering up the rest: the dry cleaning in its wrapping, shirts, pants, suits from his working days, the rest of the ties, sweaters, belts, shoes, slippers, a robe, jackets, coats, a variety of ball caps and visors, socks, pajamas. I bagged all of it except a few items I found in the top drawer of his bureau: a wristwatch, a St. Christopher medal, and his wedding ring, which my mother must have put there after we left the mortuary for the last time with his ashes. After that visit, I'd gone to get the car and pull around for her; she was waiting at the foot of the mortuary steps standing very still when I pulled up. I supposed they'd given her those items with the urn she held against her hip and she'd put them in her pocket.

While I tended to his affairs during the day, my mother mostly cleaned unnecessarily or rearranged cupboards and drawers that she'd already recently tended to. In the evening, she prepared us a simple meal – soup, salad, a leftover frozen casserole – and we ate on the little back patio while

sipping wine. We didn't talk much about my father. Instead, she spoke of her extended family or old friends, many of whom had also passed away. After a while, she'd become quiet and look out over what was left of their garden in the falling light, a small, sad smile creasing her lips.

Then, almost always, she'd say, "I'll be all right, don't you think?"

I'd nod and reply, "I think so, yes." Sometimes, I reached over and squeezed her hand.

I found several unfinished things in the garage, which held its old, familiar, dank smell as soon as I entered it. The first was a birdhouse on his workbench. The sides and bottom of it were nailed together, but the roof sat peaked and alone beside small cans of primer and red paint. A crumbled sheet of folded sandpaper that still held the impressions of his fingertips and a thin coating of sawdust surrounded the pieces. They sat below his tools that were arranged, as always, precisely by size and type on the pegboard behind the bench. A tin shade covered a bare bulb above it; I pulled the string that dangled there, the bulb blinked on, and a small globe of yellow light washed over the birdhouse materials. I stacked them neatly where the bench met the pegboard, swept away the sawdust, and turned off the light. I left the tools where they were instead of asking my mother what she wanted done with them; I figured I might use them to fix things for her from time to time when I visited.

Another unfinished thing I found in the garage was his lawnmower with one of its front wheels off. It tilted cockeyed next to the workbench. I picked up the wheel and studied it; the threading on its short axle appeared to be partly stripped, which he hadn't yet fixed. I'd already called and hired a yard service to come regularly for my mother, so I rolled the lawnmower out to the alley, set the wheel on top of the frame, and left it there. I knew someone would come along and take it. I'd helped my father leave things he wanted to discard there a number of times over the years, and eventually, they all disappeared.

The last thing I found unfinished in the garage involved his golf clubs. My mother suggested I give them away to the teenage boy who lived down the street, and before he came to get them, I went through the zipped pockets on the bag. I left the balls and tees, but took out a partially completed scorecard on which scores for a foursome were recorded for only the first two holes. On top of the card, in his even printing, was a date from several weeks earlier and the words: lightning storm…present this card for a free round, followed by someone's scribbled initials. I looked at his scores: he'd parred the first hole and bogeyed the second. I thought of playing as his partner in a father-son tournament several years before; my siblings and I were supposed to have played with him on that anniversary trip.

While I was there those extra days, my mother usually rose before dawn; I couldn't remember her doing that before. By the time I'd get up, she'd be finishing the newspaper at the kitchen table, a hollowed half of grapefruit and a half-full cup of cold coffee in front of her.

"Good morning," she'd say, and take out the sports page for me.

I'd make myself the same breakfast, sit in the chair across from her that had been my father's, and we'd read silently together for a while. Perhaps a dog would bark nearby or sprinklers would hiss on in a neighbor's yard. At some point, she'd get up, pull her housedress around her, and go outside. Then I'd watch her through the window fill the birdfeeder that hung from the apple tree with new seed; I'd remember watching her make pies with those apples each fall when we were growing up and thinking then that she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

I found an uncompleted message in my father's "Drafts" folder on his computer when I was closing his email account. It was to his oldest friend, Bob, who he'd grown up with a couple of towns away, and it lamented how infrequently they got together. It was from a few years earlier before Bob had passed away himself. I didn't know why my father hadn't sent it.

In the nightstand drawer next to his side of the bed, I found a paperback of "easy level" word searches, several of which were partially complete. There was a bottle of sleeping pills in there, too, with only one pill left. My mother and father had separate laundry hampers beside their nightstands, and his held several items that still retained his scent. I threw them away.

My father was the one who kept up their photo albums. They occupied several bookshelves in the den. I flipped through each of them. The earliest ones included photos of their wedding, honeymoon, and the first few years of my life; the pages were black construction-type paper, and the black and white snapshots were mounted with tiny anchors at the corners. The next set of albums, the most numerous, were spiral bound with sticky flypaper-liek pages under tight shiny sheets; they chronicled mostly the childhoods of my siblings and me – birthday parties, summer vacations at the shore, unwrapping Christmas gifts, and the like. There were fewer and fewer albums as the years went on and each of us moved out; what remained were of a smaller variety with slots in the heavy plastic sleeves where individual photos were inserted, and they generally involved pictures of family get-togethers or visits they made to where one of us lived. Overall, there were few photos of just the two of them. The most recent album had a couple dozen photos that hadn't yet been arranged from our last family reunion the summer before, almost all of which focused on the grandchildren doing things together. When I asked my mother what she wanted me to do with that one, she sighed and said to put it away and she'd get to it herself later.

My father also kept scrapbooks on separate shelves in that room that began with clippings of his athletic exploits in high school and college and his brief minor league baseball stint before their marriage when he had to start selling life insurance for a steadier income. A few of those clippings included grainy photographs of him in a team uniform looking ruddy and confident. The majority of the rest were articles from company newsletters over the years chronicling his career growth to regional vice-president that ended with a collection of items waiting to be glued in: agendas, napkins, coasters, and flyers from the last company convention the two of them had attended before he retired where he'd been a keynote speaker. When

I asked my mother about those, she told me the same thing she had about the last photo album.

Sometimes after dinner during that visit, my mother and I would take a walk through the neighborhood. She moved slowly, almost shuffling, and usually looped her arm though mine. As we went along, she would point out things about the neighbors, most of which she'd already told me previously. Occasionally, children rode by on bicycles, but not as many as I remembered from my childhood. Over the treetops, I could see the spire of St. Richard's Church where we'd been parishioners growing up and where my father had been an usher. I thought of him showing us to our pew each Sunday morning. I couldn't remember the last time we'd gone when I'd been home, so I didn't know for sure if they'd continued attending regularly themselves, although the funeral service was held there.

At times as we walked, my mother would begin to hum, usually an old standard I could remember her singing to herself as she did the dishes. Sometimes, her fingertips trembled a bit on my forearm. But, she didn't cry; she'd only done that when each of us had first arrived and during the funeral service.

I saved going through my father's desk in the den until the day before I was leaving. I guess it's not surprising that I also found some unfinished things there. I worked my way from the front of his files to the back. I found a subscription for a golf magazine that was only partially filled out. I found a form for additional long-term care insurance from his company on which he'd only written his name. A file marked "Travel" held several brochures that I set aside for river cruises in Europe; I knew my parents had long talked about taking one of those, but they never had.

The last file was untitled and only had a single envelope in it. My mother's name was written in his even printing on the outside. I took out the paper inside and unfolded it. It was an unfinished letter to her that read: "I feel like I'm in another world right now over what you told me last night. You said you just bumped into your old high school boyfriend at the store while I was traveling for work, that he was home for a visit, that you took a drive at night in his car to a park you used to go to together when you were young, that things just happened, that I'd grown distant, that you ended up in his backseat, that it couldn't even be called an affair, that it was only that once, that you hadn't been in contact with him since, that it was just a moment of recklessness, that it was a mistake. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know if I can stay with…" It ended there.

I lowered the letter slowly to my lap and sat blinking, staring down at it. The letter was undated, and the plain white paper wasn't yellowed, so it was impossible to tell how long ago he'd written it. He'd been retired four years, but she might have waited to tell him, or it may have been many years before. Why had she chosen to at all? What had transpired between them since she did? I thought of discovering my own wife's infidelity while we were still married.

I heard the shower start in my mother's bathroom and the stall door click closed. I replaced the letter in the envelope and brought it out to the back patio. I uncovered the gas

bar-b-que, took off the grill, started the burners, and dropped the envelope into the flames. I watched it burn and heard the sound of my mother singing in the shower, heard the spray of the water cascading over her body.

My mother drove me to the airport the next morning. It was an early flight, so we left before breakfast. We got out at the curb and embraced. She felt smaller than I remembered, frailer. I could smell her shampoo, the talcum powder she used. When we released each other, I took the travel brochures I'd come across the day before from the inside pocket of my sports coat and gave them to her. She turned them over slowly in her hands, and said, "Yes, we had a lot of things left to do together. And now we'll never get to do them."

I imagined her driving home and walking into that house alone. A breeze came up and blew a wisp of gray hair across her forehead. She gave me one of her small, sad smiles, and I did my best to return it.