

Life Insurance

She still missed the way the sunlight would spill across the piano in the late afternoon sun. The exact shade of honey that poured in from her westward window used to pool across the cool blackness of her grand piano. From her wicker rocking chair, she would sip her evening martini and observe how the warm evening glow could dance along the stark darkness of the piano, creating a blend of light and shadows as captivating as open flame. She would sit in that rocking chair and twist the rings around her fingers, thinking about the piano and her afternoon game at the Toronto Bridge Club. Sometimes, after finishing off the dregs of her drink and the sucking down the little cocktail onion, she would ride her happy hour buzz into an evening of cleaning her apartment under the fading evening light, cradling each knick-knack as she dusted and occasionally humming to herself, usually Frank Sinatra or maybe Glenn Miller. My Fair Lady, if she had added an extra splash of gin.

She agreed to move in with Owen on the condition that he set aside an entire room for her to claim as her own, and that she could keep her last name. She filled it with her trinkets and her wicker rocking chair and the scent of her eau de toilette, but Owen pronounced the piano impossible to move, so she had been compelled to sell it off. Most of her knick-knacks had been packed up and moved out to the boondocks with her, she had insisted upon it. If she was going to give up her seasonal passes to the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, she refused to sacrifice her various vases and ceramic ornaments. Betty Longway took pride in her appearance, constantly tending not just to her physical appearance but also her social and culture acumen. She spent most of her twenties floating through high society, occasionally settling into a single circle of heiresses and actors, but mostly just perusing cocktail parties for an illusive invitation to Paris or her next beaux. Once accustomed to a lifestyle of evening gowns and open bars, it's nearly impossible to settle for less. Betty realized she was settling now, cozying up into the comfortable seat of suburbia, but she refused to relinquish the various detritus that had accumulated over the course of her cultured life.

On a childish whim, Betty had agreed to move in with Owen nearly two years ago, and she could hardly believe she had been living in Thunder Bay for so long. As a girl, Betty had summered at a cottage on the lake with her parents, and in a rose-tinted fog, she imagined life with Owen on the same lake would be similarly carefree. But the wind swept across the shoreline, hammering against the trees until they knelt at the altar of the lake. Every tree on their property, which was propped up on the rocky edge of the bay on the outskirts of town, curved away from the water as if they were trying to flee from the barren winters and sun-scorched summers of northern Ontario. Although she remembered splashing and building sandcastles, Betty now realized the water was too cold for swimming most of the year.

Not that she would be able to go swimming even if the water had been warmer. Owen had taken a nasty spill last Boxing Day and thrown out his back, so Betty spent most of her time caring for him. She shuttled him to doctor appointments and administered pain meds, in addition to maintaining all the cooking and cleaning of the over-sized McMansion. She had just gotten

back from a trip to the medical supply warehouse on the other side of town, where Owen had sent her for a specific hot patch that would apparently alleviate the stress on his lower back.

“Owen, honey, I just went over there last week to buy you a hot patch,” she had said.

“Betty, baby, this one is a much higher grade. Doc said it would target the tension in the lower Lombardic column. Don’t you want me to sleep better?” Of course she wanted him to sleep better, she assured him, so of course she would go that morning while he rested after his physical therapy session. “It’s not like you’ve got anything else goin’ on, sweetheart,” Owen taunted, even though she had already picked up her purse to leave.

She breathed in the memory of his sly comment and sighed it right back out between her painted lips. She had made it back home to her rocking chair, which sat in the warm circle of the fireplace. Even though it was well into April, a blanket of ice and wind still choked Thunder Bay. Sometimes it felt as if this little circle under the mantle offered the only warmth between here and Toronto.

“Betty-boop!” Owen shouted for the Barcalounger in the living room, where he sat watching hockey almost every evening. In the off season, he watched reruns of his own college hockey career. Betty tried to ignore him, hoping to eke out a few more silent moments, with her feet so close to the fire they were practically in the embers, but Owen had maintained the volume and projection of his deep baritone voice, even as his body had begun to wither away. “Betty!” He bellowed again, pushing through the final ‘y’ sound for multiple beats.

She slipped her feet back into her slippers and stubbed her toe on the corner of a broken-down trundle bed, which lay in a heap in the corner of the room, then limped down to the kitchen. Only a carton of eggs, two overripe tomatoes, a package of half-wilted spinach, a jar of martini olives, and, of course, a case of beer filled the fridge. She had meant to go to the store today. Hadn’t she written out her grocery list this morning? Or maybe that was last week. She pulled a couple chicken thighs out of the pit of the freezer and shook herself another martini. Then she took Molson Light to Owen, who was plunged into the third quarter of the semi-finals game of his junior year of college.

Standing a few feet behind Owen, Betty watched him watch a younger version of himself glide across the screen. Years before that tape was recorded, Owen and Betty had gone to high school together in a quaint Toronto neighborhood. They’d been badminton partners for the school team and had won the regional co-ed championship two years in a row. In those days, they were both blonder and bouncier. Always a little lankier than most hockey players, Owen had gangly arms and legs that always seemed to be moving or shaking, which helped him on the ice and held him back in the classroom. Everything about him seemed to have faded and slowed since then, except for his eyes. If anything, they were bluer and kinder with age. When Betty caught his eye early in the morning, sometimes she locked looks with the bumbling boy of her youth, and in his eyes, she could see her own adolescence reflected back.

After graduating high school, they’d gone their separate ways and hadn’t bothered to keep in touch. They never dated and never had many mutual friends. Always preoccupied with dinner parties and department store women’s sections, Betty honestly had never thought much

about him, until they collided at a housewarming party. His lawyer was her former downstairs neighbor. Five decades since their paths diverged, Owen and Betty reconnected only a few miles from where they'd gone to school. Lucky Betty, she chuckled to herself.

"Betty, darlin', when is dinner goin' to be ready? You know Doc says I'm not supposed to take the painkiller on an empty stomach, and let me tell you, my stomach is very empty right now."

"The doctor also told you not to drink while taking your pain meds," Betty twisted the beer open, set it on the coffee table, and reached to flip on the lamp in one fluid motion. She kept her eyes from looking around the living room, which looked progressively more similar to her son's bedroom when he was a 15-year-old slob. She had avoided her son's room for years, and she intended to take the same approach with Owen's living-room-turned-pigsty.

She stepped over stray pillow cushions and piles of old newspapers. Owen insisted on maintaining their subscription to the Toronto Star for the crossword puzzle, but he hardly ever filled more than a dozen answers in. Occasionally, Betty would flip through the obituaries to scan for any familiar faces, but usually the newspapers just accumulated in piles on the floor. Empty beers littered the table adjacent to the recliner, and when Betty strutted past, the glass bottles would tinkle together slightly, like an earthbound windchime. Although Betty could never confirm it—partially because her knees wouldn't support her crouching to the floor and partially because her bifocal prescription no longer accommodated her worsening vision—she had a suspicion that a thick layer of dried food particles and beer stains encrusted the carpet. Some patches crunched slightly underfoot.

Betty liked to think of herself as a meticulous person. Her apartment in Toronto could have passed a health inspection, and she never left the house without full hair and makeup. She even slept in rollers the night before badminton competitions and applied a double coating of hairspray, just in case they made it into the school paper. But she hadn't bothered with all that since Owen had taken a fall. That night she rushed him to the ER, unkept as the day she came into the world, and, as luck would have it, the emergency care doctor was charming and handsome, with no wedding ring. Betty could cry just thinking about her wiry hair, completely gray at the roots, while talking to that fetching physician. She did her best to focus on the doctor's diagnosis, but she couldn't stop fidgeting with her hair, and Owen kept babbling on from the hospital bed. It was almost impossible to get out of bed next morning, let alone iron her pantsuit or curl her hair. All she could manage was a touch of lipstick.

Lost in thought, Betty stumbled over a pile of dirty towels in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. She would move them later, after dinner when she would have more energy. In the kitchen, she stepped around the bags of trash that Owen had refused to take out (he claimed he couldn't because of his back, but she knew otherwise) and began fixing his plate of food, washing all of the dishes she needed as she went because the dishwasher was clogged and hadn't run in at least a month. She made another mental note to clean the kitchen after dinner. For dinner, Betty made Owen plain chicken and sauteed spinach, and she made herself another drink. How many was that?

Betty sat at the kitchen table, in a little space she carved for herself between dirty dishes and empty boxes of frozen dinners, and tried to remember how many martinis she had had. Then she remembered the delicate olive picks she always used in her drinks back at her apartment in Toronto. Jack Beaumont (or maybe it was Peter Hughlen?) had gifted them to her one evening before taking her out to the opera. How distant that all seemed now. Where had those crystalline olive picks gone? And what happened to that fur coat she wore to the opera that night? She wondered if Jack Beaumont had ever married. She always hoped he would propose to her, but Christopher McClain popped the question first. She smiled a little to herself and took a sip, leaving a small residue of pink lipstick on the rim. After years of her life spent entertaining high society, she had married an insurance man. It worked out well for her in the end. Christopher McClain had had excellent life insurance.

A small laugh rang out over the sound of the TV in the other room, and she was surprised to find it her own. The tune sounded disjointed, almost maniacal, even to her own ear.

She blinked once then it all went black. Almost as if someone had hypnotized her then snapped their fingers, she suddenly woke up, standing in the darkness. Her hand clenched the banister of the staircase that stretch out below her. Through the faint glow leeching in from the streetlights outside, Betty picked her way across mounds of detritus from the top of the staircase to her room at the end of the hall. At the last minute she turned left instead of right, settling herself into her rocking chair. The embers still simmered from that afternoon's blaze. It was a fire hazard to leave these fireplaces burning, she reminded herself before drifting off.

When she woke up in the morning, she felt that familiar twinge in her neck from sleeping in the rocking chair, but she gently shook it off and trudged her way through the garbage down the stairs and to the kitchen. Sifting through piles of bills and Christmas cards from her children, she eventually found the phone, stuffed between a half-filled legal pad and wine-stained takeout menus. Languidly she dialed for the police.

"Yes, hello I think my husband may have fallen in the middle of the night. Please hurry." Then she made a pot of coffee.

When the ambulance arrived, Betty directed them to Owen's lifeless body. Facedown with his robe undone. The EMTs, and the police that arrived shortly after, were much more focused on Owen than Betty, who nestled herself at the breakfast table where they must not have seen her.

"Jesus H Christ, how did they live like this?"

"No wonder he fell down the stairs. The poor bastard probably couldn't see the steps through all the shit on the floor." Glancing at the coffee table covered in beer bottles, they shook their heads.

"When my parents get this old, I'm putting them in a fucking home. They just can't take care of themselves."

But Betty wouldn't be going into a home. She and all of her little knick-knacks would be moving back into her old apartment in Toronto and renewing her season passes to the orchestra.

Maybe she would buy back her old piano. Really any west-facing apartment and grand piano would do. Then she would maybe track down Jack Beaumont and see if he was still married.

Workshop notes:

- First 3 sentences are repetitive
 - Third was best, according to Jasmine
- Change title (?)
- Do I need to make it more clear one way or another?
- Confusing paragraph around blackout and waking up
 - Unsure how to navigate an event that the narrator isn't fully processing
 - I kind of like when I have to go back and make sure I understand what happened, but it's a fine line
- Clarify logic in why the place became so cluttered and dirty?
 - Triumph in her choice not to clean it
 - Not a permanent space for her
- They live in modern world, even though they're old
 - Present reality
- Want a little more to push her to this point, even if its within her own twisted logic
 - What was the reason that she married him?
 - Why is she doing this?
- Possibly involving the knick-knacks
- EMTs wouldn't say that in front of her
 - Also wouldn't suggest a nursing home