

What Happens

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First Place Winner, Fiction

This is what happens when you die. You leave everything behind. Everything... even your decrepit corpse. Jewelry, china, cars... these become material items that your kids get to fight over. But this is what happens when you have no kids—no “next of kin,” they call it. The last member of a family dies and their tree falls silently in the forest. A last name vanishes. This is what happens when you don’t draw up a will, when you don’t have anyone to inherit what you’ve left behind. This is what happens when you die in your sleep and the Meals on Wheels lady comes and finds you a week later, still in your chair with the newspaper on your lap. Dead. Alone.

What happens is guys like us come and go through all your junk. Your clothes, your dishes, your record albums, your books, the dusty board games and the boxes of wooden figurines. It’s junk because nothing’s valuable. Your dead body lies unclaimed in the morgue and guys like us come haul your crap away.

Salvation Army. Goodwill. Mexican families. Single mothers. Food Stampers. Everyone will have their grubby hands sorting through the remnants of your life as it hangs on racks or gets stuffed into bins for the masses to buy, use, and discard.

The city might hang on to paper stuff—your photo albums, Christmas cards, yearbooks, letters, and certificates. They’ll keep these artifacts—the sum of your life—locked in a vault, just in case you might have some obscure family member somewhere who might want it. But when it’s been five years and no one has come forward, it goes into the landfill to rot, just like your corpse. A life’s history is forgotten.

That’s what happens.

And it’s what happened to the guy in apartment 1B, some old guy who died—no family to speak of, no will... no one even noticed he was dead for a while. That’s why the kid and I are here in his apartment with cardboard boxes, pulling books off the shelves and clothes off the hangers.

Tomb raiding.

It’s funny how you can get to know a guy by going through his stuff—this particular old guy liked Sherlock Holmes novels. He was partial to striped shirts. He liked those old western movies with John Wayne. And it’s creepy because he’s dead. In fact, the entire apartment is heavy with death—everything in it is doomed to be used and re-used until it is useless. Everything is dying.

The kid's sorting out the stuff in the guy's bedroom closet, mainly clothes and shoes and stuff. The kid is Ryan Hanson, a baby-faced twentysomething who started working with us a few weeks back. Sentenced to six months serving the community. I didn't ask why—none of my business, really. Maybe he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Either way, that kid wouldn't last a week in jail. It's better he's here—encouraging people to donate to charity, ringing the bell by those red buckets where people toss their change.

But today I'm showing him the dirty side of the job—the shitty part of this volunteering that always makes me wonder why I do it in the first place—sifting through the contents of a dead man's closet.

“Nate?” Ryan says, “This shoe doesn't have a match.”

“Then it goes in the trash, kid. We can't sell shoes without their mates.”

“I wonder where the other one is.”

“Well if you find it, put them both in the box over there,” I tell him.

I usually like volunteering—gives me a good feeling somehow. Like I'm doing some good and helping people. But this... what the kid and I are doing... doesn't feel right. Damn the old man... a simple piece of paper saying that he wanted his stuff to be donated to Goodwill or something and this whole ordeal would be okay with me. This feels like we're harvesting the organs from someone without a donor sticker.

“I wonder where he wore these shoes,” Ryan says, breaking the silence.

“Which shoes?”

“All of them. Just where he went, the places he saw, the things he did.”

“Just standard stuff, I guess,” I say as I scratch the gray stubble on my chin.

“Yeah...” he says, and he's still holding that one shoe he found. It's one of those old-man tennis shoes with the tiny holes over the toe, beat up and dirty.

“Found the other shoe yet?” I ask him.

“No.”

“Hm.”

“Reminds me of all those shoes you see on the highway. Just one lone shoe. Ever seen one like that?”

“I've seen a few over the years.”

“Kinda creeps you out, huh?”

The kid has no idea. They remind me of those pictures from the Titanic, the ones with empty shoes on the ocean floor, and all you can think about when you look at them are people drowning in freezing water. And at the Holocaust Museum they have that giant pile of shoes and all you can see are the tiny baby shoes and all you can think about are people dying in gas chambers and ovens. Empty shoes remind me of death. Mortality.

“Yeah,” I say, “it creeps me out.”

“I’ve always wondered why they’re there... where they came from.”

I think of people murdered in hit-and-run accidents, their shoes knocked right off their feet... pools of blood on the asphalt. I think of city gangs who place their dead buddy’s shoe on top of a highway sign as a memorial.

“I dunno where they come from,” I say.

And the kid falls silent again. He finishes up the closet—now just a bare clothes bar and empty shelves, and we carry the sagging cardboard boxes to the front door.

“Do you ever think about where we go when we die?” he asks.

At fifty-six, it’s visited the back of my mind a time or two.

“Occasionally,” I say.

“What do you think happens?”

“We just... end I suppose. We fall asleep and we don’t wake up again.”

“If you died in your sleep, would you think Heaven was just a dream?”

“I dunno. Don’t ask so many questions, kid.”

We take the boxes out to the U-Haul truck that’s parked out front, and wouldn’t you know it, the kid starts talking again.

“Where do you think the dead guy is?”

“The city morgue.”

“No, I mean where do you think his soul went?”

“I’m no expert on those kinds of things.”

“Is he going to have a funeral?”

“Maybe the city will pony up for a service, respect for the dead and all.”

“So we’re pretty much the last ones who will ever think about him.”

“Depressing thought,” I say.

I wonder to myself if the dead guy’s last thoughts were about this, if he wished he had a family to leave behind who would remember him. People who would write a lengthy obituary and say nice things about him at his funeral, people who would mourn his death and miss him every day.

“Yeah,” the kid says, “he’s like that shoe of his, the one with no match. Alone.”

Huh. An abandoned sole.

“What did you do with that shoe?” I ask him, heaving a box into the back of the truck.

“It’s still in the bedroom.”

“Well bring it with you when we leave.”

“Why?”

“I just got a weird idea.”

“What?”

“Shoes on the highway. Sometimes they’re a random occurrence, and sometimes they’re put there as a memorial to people who died. Gangs used to do it when their buddies got killed.”

“Really?”

“Fact.”

“So what’s your idea?”

“Let’s finish up here, then I’ll let you know.”

That night, the kid and I drive my old pickup truck out of the city on Highway 104. He’s holding that beat up old-man shoe on his lap.

“Nate?” he says after the first ten miles or so.

“Yeah?”

“I thought you said you didn’t know where the shoes came from.”

“Which shoes?”

“You know. The highway shoes.”

“Oh. Yeah. I dunno, I just remembered all of a sudden about the gangs. They’ve got some funny traditions.”

“How did you find out about them?”

“Had a buddy in a gang when I was younger.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Good kid... just got involved with the wrong crowd.”

Ryan stares at the shoe in his lap. “What happened to him?”

“I dunno. Lost touch with him over the years. I had a job and he had the gang. They became his family. His friends. For all I know I could have passed his shoe on the side of the road.”

He falls silent after that.

The highway seems to go on to infinity; the half-moon beams of the headlights light up only about twenty feet in front of us.

“Here looks like as good a place as any,” I say after a while, and we pull over next to a sign that reads, “Rest Stop 20 Miles.”

We get out, and the kid ties the dirty laces of the shoe together. He loops it over the corner of the sign, and it hangs there in the yellow glow of the headlights.

“Should we say something?” he asks, stepping back to stand next to me.

“Sure.”

“You do it.”

“Nah. You do it.”

“It was your idea.”

“You found the shoe.”

“Fine, then,” the kid says. He stands there for a moment with his thumbs hooked in his jean pockets, then stares into the starless sky and says, “I hope you can rest in peace, Old Guy, and that you can see your family again, like your mom and dad and your wife and all that. I’m sorry we had to go through your home and get rid of all your stuff.”

And even though I’m not a religious man I say, “Amen.”

We stand there for a minute, just looking at that damn empty shoe dangling off the edge of the metal sign, with the scent of damp grass and the sound of tires on wet asphalt as cars rush by us.

No one should be forgotten.

Ryan and I walk back to my truck, our shoes slick with moisture from the grass. “We never even knew the guy,” he says as he climbs in.

“Yeah I know,” I say, “I guess no one did anymore.”

“And once his stuff is donated, and new people move in to his apartment and everything, it’ll be like he didn’t exist.”

“Except for his shoe, thanks to us.”

“Yeah,” the kid says, “I’ll remember this. What we did.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah. Today’s given me something to think about.”

“Yeah, Ryan,” I say, “me too.” And we’re silent the rest of the way back to the city. Back to our families, back to our friends, back to the ones who will take care of us when we die, the ones who will remember us when we’re gone. Because that’s what happens.