

THE LEGACY

"Fifty dollars to clean out everything in here and dispose of it." Frank looked at the piles that cluttered the floor of the two-car garage as he estimated that it would take two days and three or four trips with his big stake-body truck to clear away the mess. He didn't see anything of value. Fifty dollars was a bargain; he'd usually charge double that for a job like this.

"How soon can you do it?" The old man, whose daughter was moving home so that he wouldn't have to go to a nursing home, stared at his friend of many years. "Dorothy says she needs the garage for her car if she's going to live here."

"I can start tomorrow. Today, if you want me to, but I've got a couple of things to finish up first. You just tell me what you want."

"Can I watch you?" Jack's voice quavered. "Are you sure you want to?"

"Gotta say goodbye to my stuff."

"Do you have a lawn chair?" When Jack nodded, Frank indicated a shady spot under a huge sycamore tree. "We'll set you up over there with a big pitcher of iced tea. Your job will be to make sure we don't get thirsty."

"I don't make good tea."

"That's okay. I'll make the tea and keep the pitcher filled for you." Frank's hand rested gently on Jack's shoulder. "You just keep our glasses full."

"Best offer I've had all day. When will you be back?"

"Give me an hour or two. I've got to run some errands and then stop by the house and pick up my son and my big truck. We'll be here before lunchtime."

Jack wiped his face with his old handkerchief, worn thin from years of use, as if to clear away a film of sweat, but they both knew he was trying to maintain control of his emotions. He nodded. "See you then."

Frank shook his hand, climbed into his truck, and started the engine. "I'll be back before you know it." He waved and backed into the street. As he drove away, Jack was slowly climbing the step that led to the kitchen door. On the way home, Frank stopped by to pick up used tires from two of his regular stops. He called from the first one. "Elaine? Tell Terry to get ready to go with me. I'll be home in about twenty minutes. We're cleaning out Jack's garage." Terry, the youngest of his three sons and a junior in high school, was waiting when Frank got home. They put the cooler with the lunch Elaine had quickly packed for them into the cab of the truck, grabbed a box of lawn and leaf bags, and headed to Jack's to begin the job.

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Jack had set up a card table and three lawn chairs under the tree and was waiting for them. He watched as the truck backed up to his garage. "Big truck," he thought. As Terry got out of the truck, he smiled. "I remember when you were a little guy. I never thought you'd get so big so fast."

"Neither did I." Frank came around his truck. "Can you see everything from here?" At Jack's nod, he added, "Okay, Terry, let's get started. Time's money." He turned and headed into the garage with Terry close behind.

It was late the next afternoon when Frank indicated the rafters. "Do you want me to get rid of all that fiberboard for you?"

"Sure. I won't be using it." There was a sour note in his voice as he continued, "Dorothy will see to that."

From the top of the stairs, Frank hollered to his son. "Terry. Get off the truck and come here. This is going to take both of us."

A few minutes after Terry dashed up the stairs, they descended from the rafters, carefully carrying a long piece of fiberboard. Jack watched them. "I never knew what to do with that thing," he said, "so I put it up there."

"What is it?" Terry asked. "I mean, I know it's a painting, but it's awfully big, isn't it?" "That's why I couldn't figure out what to do with it," Jack agreed. "It's a mural. Some kid painted it for an art class when he was about your age. About thirty years ago. He teaches art at the University now."

"What do you want me to do with it?" asked Frank. "I can't just take something like this."

"I paid two dollars for it. Give me two dollars and hang it where people can look at it, and it's yours."

"Is my living room good enough? I can hang it over the couch."

"Don't be so sure. Florence wouldn't let me hang it in the house. Said it was her house, too, and she didn't want to look at those rats."

Terry was busy examining the artist's signature. "Dad! Mom knows this guy. She's in Art Guild with him."

Frank peeled off two dollar bills from the small wad he had in his pocket and handed them to Jack. "We'll see if he wants it back." He opened the door to his truck and pulled out a canvas tarpaulin from behind the seat. With Terry's help, he carefully wrapped the mural and situated it against his truck. "We'll cushion this with the rest of the fiberboard for the ride

home."

"I'm glad I asked you to do this for me. You'll take care of my things." In a distinct change from his demeanor of the last two days, Jack smiled at his friend.

"I'm a nice guy." Frank grinned back. "If you don't believe me, just ask me." Terry groaned, but he said nothing as he headed back to the rafters. A few hours later, the rafters were clear, the truck was loaded, and the garage was swept clean. Jack handed Frank an envelope. "Here's what I owe you." They shook hands. "Take good care of my painting. I'll be sure Dorothy calls you when it's time to do the house."

Frank shook his head. "No. Have her call an auctioneer. Instead of paying me to take stuff away, she'll get some money from what's in there. I know how Florence took care of that house." He handed the pitcher and glasses to Terry, who took them into the house. He folded up the table and set it inside the garage, leaning it against the workbench. "I'll be back to visit. A lot." He watched as Terry climbed into the truck. "But for now, I've got to get this boy home. He's got a date tonight."

"Elaine! You're not going to believe what Jack had in the rafters!"

Although she couldn't see her husband, Elaine could certainly hear him, and she knew that dinner would have to wait a few minutes. She hurried to the front door. From there, she could see Frank and Terry as they unwrapped a huge *something*. She held the door open as they brought it inside. Only when they propped it against the sofa could she see that it was a mural. "Where did you get that?"

Frank grinned, but it was Terry who spoke first. "Jack had it upstairs in his garage. Look, Mom, that Siegfried guy you know painted it in 1942!"

"And we're supposed to hang it where people can see it," Frank interjected.

"For now, lean it against the wall behind the sofa. I've got to see if Siegfried wants it back. He'll be at Art Guild tomorrow night." Elaine turned toward the kitchen. "But first, I've to feed some hungry men. You're about to get meat loaf *without* biscuits if I don't get them into the oven."

"Yes, I remember that mural. I had just done a research paper on William Greenleaf Eliot for my Missouri history class. He was T.S. Eliot's grandfather, you know. Anyway, I had included sketches of him at different stages of his life, so when my art teacher assigned us to do murals, this was a natural."

"Why did she assign murals to high school students?" Elaine wondered.

"Back in the 1930's and 40's, murals were very popular. First it was the Mexican painters

who popularized them, and then the WPA hired local artists to paint murals for post offices and other public buildings." Siegfried Reinhardt, professor of art at Washington University, shrugged his shoulders. "She wanted us to create murals that told the story of a St. Louisan who was famous or who had been influential. Someone did Eugene Fields. I did Eliot."

"Would you like to have it back?"

"Heavens, no. Your husband bought it. Hang it in your home and enjoy it." "I'd like you to see it after it's hung." "Can I send my students to see it? I did do a good job of incorporating all the elements of a historical mural, and it would be very educational for them to compare it with the one at the airport."

"Of course, they may come to see it."

And come they did. Some years there were only one or two; other years there were a lot. But after Siegfried died, they stopped coming, which saddened Elaine. She thought about how much she had learned from the mural. She had learned that William Greenleaf Eliot was a Unitarian minister, newly graduated from Harvard, when he accepted the challenge to go to St. Louis in 1834 to establish a Unitarian church there. More than a century after he worked to establish them, her children had attended the St. Louis Public Schools, and they had used the public library system that he had helped to establish. She had learned that he was co-founder of what was to become Washington University. Before she was even aware that he had existed, his influence had touched her life and the lives of everyone in her family. More than a hundred years after his death in 1887, he was still a part of the community he had served for many years.

She thought about her friend Siegfried and how he had impacted her life. If he hadn't worked to start the Art Guild—and if she hadn't taken art lessons and joined it—she would have never even have known his name. She would have passed by his murals, stained glass windows, and other artwork and appreciated them, but there was just *something* about knowing the artist that made them very special. She thought of his generosity, of how he had allowed her to keep a piece of his youth, and of how he had shared his students with her for more than a decade.

Then one day Frank came home and told her that Jack had died. With Dorothy there to care for him, Jack had lived more than fifteen years since Frank had cleaned out the garage for him. They went to the funeral home to pay their respects.

As they drove toward the city, Elaine spoke. "You know, I wonder why Jack never hung the mural in his house."

"Florence didn't like it."

"She never knew what she

missed." "And what might that be?"

"Well, since Siegfried died, I've been thinking about how much I've learned from his mural. It's things I wouldn't have known about if we hadn't had it." She spoke carefully, deliberately, and very softly. "You know, if it weren't for William Greenleaf Eliot and his commitment to education, Abby might not be a teacher today. She always loved school, and she haunted the library when she was a kid. She and Tony both read every book in the children's room and some from the adult reading room. That both of those institutions exist in St. Louis today is due in great part to his efforts."

"I learned about the cholera epidemic and the Great Fire of 1849." Frank stopped for a red light and turned to look at her.

"Siegfried took art classes in the St. Louis Public Schools. He got an English degree from Washington U."

"And their medical school trained the doctors who helped keep Larry alive for almost forty years."

Elaine closed her eyes and swallowed hard at the mention of their son's name. The doctors had rebuilt his heart three times, each time adding another decade to his lifespan. In the end, a fourth surgery hadn't been able to perform the same miracle. He had been dead for almost a year, and their grief was still fresh.

Frank parked the car carefully and asked, "Are you okay?" His huge hand closed gently around hers.

She nodded. "It's just hard. And I really don't want to go in there." She gestured toward the funeral home. "But I know how important it is to you, so let's go." She opened the car door and got out.

Back in the car, Frank said, "That's what my funeral is going to be like. There won't be anybody there."

"You've got a lot of friends."

"So did Jack, but nobody came to his funeral." He was silent for a minute. "Really, I guess he didn't have many friends left. When Dorothy came there to live, he stayed home most of the time. She wasn't often pleasant to visitors, so he didn't have many. Now she's sitting in the funeral home, waiting for people to come and share her grief, and nobody's coming. Don't let me get like that, Elaine. I don't want you to sit alone in a funeral home like that after I die." "Maybe it's time for us to plan our funerals." "Tomorrow."

And the next day they went to the funeral home, planned their funerals, and paid for them. When they got home, Frank changed into his work clothes, got into the big truck, and left. He was gone all afternoon. He returned and presented her with a lilac bush for the yard. "Sister Mary Frances said to give this to you."

"Who is Sister Mary Frances and how do you know her?" "She's in charge of the food bank in Kimmswick." "When did you see her?"

"This afternoon. I'm their new food driver. I pick it up from Second Harvest in St. Louis and deliver it to them. You can come with me, if you like."

Elaine, who filled her days with volunteer work and housekeeping chores, demurred. She began to notice that Frank was joining service organizations and spending his days working on their projects instead of working as much as usual. "I'm over seventy. I'm retired now," was all he would say when she asked him about it. "We've got our Social Security, and I don't need to work anymore."

When Frank died, the news media didn't take notice of the event, but his great fear was not realized. On the contrary, there weren't enough pages in one guest register to record the mourners; the mortuary quietly provided another. Although she didn't recognize some of the people she saw, she did recognize many of their names. Afterward, she listened to her children as they sat in her living room in front of the mural.

"Dad always said nobody would come to his funeral," Terry observed. "I guess he was wrong. There were all kinds of people there. There were a couple of nuns, and we're not even Catholic."

"They're from the food bank," said Tony. "What surprised me was how many lawyers there were. I didn't know you two had a lawyer."

"They're friends." Elaine told him quietly.

Abby was looking through the guest registers. "I'm impressed that he touched so many lives. He thought he was invisible to others, but he was so wrong." She looked thoughtful. "You know, we drove all day to get here. That's a lot of thinking time. I decided that I'm not going to mourn Daddy's death. I consider myself a Christian, so I believe that he's gone home to be with God. That should be cause for rejoicing. I'm going to miss him, more than I can ever say, but I'm not going to mourn his death." She blinked back tears and forced a smile. "I'm going to celebrate his life. I'm very fortunate to have known and loved him and even more fortunate to have been his daughter. Every time I walk into a classroom or talk to a child, I leave

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a little piece of myself. Many of those little pieces are things I learned from him, from who he was. I pass them on to the children I teach. As long as those things live in those children and in their children, Daddy will live on."

"That's it!" Elaine thought. "He wanted his life to matter. He learned that the secret to eternal life is to give pieces of yourself away to others. He knew that you don't have to be famous to make a difference in this world. I'm not the only one who learned from that mural. Frank learned more than I did, and he didn't even know it. Wouldn't he be surprised?"