

Family Isn't Always Familia

In the middle of his yard, Devon slipped on a hidden sheet of ice. The front end his snow blower tipped up into the air and his knee hit the frozen ground with so much force he let go of the handles. The scraper blade slammed against the ice coated lawn and the engine stalled. He plopped onto his ass and clutched his knee. Intense pain made him devise a contingent plan for snow removal: if its broken, call the snowplow guy.

For a few minutes, he rested behind the machine and rubbed his leg through his snow pants, that were thinned at the knees. The shifting breeze continued to blow snow off the tree limbs like freeze-dried dust. Brilliant sunlight made the falling snow sparkle as it swirled in midair. When the pain dulled, he thanked Jack Frost his patella was intact.

He stood up and slipped again yet managed to keep his balance by grabbing onto one of the handles of his snow blower. After setting his feet, he yanked the pull cord three or four times until the coughing engine became a steady hum. Snow shot fifteen feet into the air as he forced the blower's auger into a three-foot drift of white powder packed together by the howling winds from yesterday's Nor'easter.

By the time he put the blower back in the shed, a layer of snow caked his brown duck Carhartt jacket. His thermal underwear bottoms were drenched from water that soaked through the weakened areas of his snow pants. Both knees throbbed from slipping and falling at least a half dozen times, and his cheeks, stubbled with a long weekend of growth, were numb. The ice under the snow covered most of the ground and was more treacherous than a Slip 'N Slide coated with baby oil.

Inside his split-level house, he undressed near the blazing wood stove in the finished great room of the basement. Clumps of snow and drops of melt water landed on the metal top and sizzled away in seconds. He tossed his red stocking cap on the baby fence—a relic from his twin’s toddler days—surrounding the front and sides of the stove. A glob of snowy ice splattered on the tile floor. The colorless slurpy held its snow-hill shape the entire time he sat on the bench and took off his remaining gear.

He sat down on a long wooden bench to pull off his boots. The jerky maneuver made the bench teeter and a stack of folders fell off it. Dozens of papers and files scattered across the tiled floor. The large pile of documents and personal affairs had sat on the end of the bench ever since his late father’s attorney hand delivered it. For over four months he intended to sort through the stack, but every day he failed to accomplish the task.

Death of a close relative was foreign and tenuous even though it occurred often enough he took charge when a close family member died. His brother and sister became too emotional, too erratic for solid decision making when loved ones passed on. They became emotional nincompoops for favorite aunts, uncles, and grandparents; the death of their beloved parent took them to new unexpected levels.

He stood up wearing only his sweat drenched black boxers and heavy wool socks. Before he turned to head upstairs for a much-needed cup of coffee and a change of clothes, he paused. One of the legal sized white envelopes had fallen on top of the puddle created by the once slushy mound. Half of the envelope was soaked through exposing the document inside of it. He bent down and picked up the saturated paperwork.

Being as careful as possible, he took the official document out of the envelope. The paper was heavier stock than typical parchment like a full sheet of index cards. A silver embossed seal for the state of Maine was affixed to the upper right corner. The names of his father and mother were typed under the signature lines, which were signed as well as dated—four years before the birth of his older brother.

He reread the title of the document. *Petition for Guardianship*. Joyce Sook Nguyen, the ten-year-old child's name, was as unfamiliar to Devon as any name could be. In their backwater town, about forty-five minutes Downeast of Portland, he was unable to recall a single Vietnamese family or person in his family's orbit—in youth or adulthood.

He placed the envelope on the wood stacked by the stove. His wife and kids were upstairs, and he needed their familiarity to steady his racing mind. The yellow flames inside the rectangular glass panes of the wood stove's door held him fast. Maybe he should burn the document. Some secrets were better off rotting in the grave with the people who held them close for decades.

A few years back, the death of an uncle taught him a hard lesson in solving mysteries. Devon's quazi-detective work uncovered the criminal activity that tarnished the entire family's name and destroyed his uncle's widow and teenaged children. Their inevitable grudge saddened him, and he rued his involvement. A low-level town councilor taking a couple bribes weren't heinous crimes, yet it drove the man to suicide.

Upstairs in the kitchen, he kissed his wife Bethany and the foreheads of his twin daughters who were still wearing pajamas. The wet document in his hand was limp and heavy as

he held it next to his leg. Cold numbness of his hands, face, and ears continued to give way to the warm tingles, which made his dry skin itch more.

“What’s on the agenda?” Devon leaned against the kitchen island.

His wife Bethany poured buttermilk into a medium sized bowl containing flour, oil, vanilla, and eggs. “Sledding, puzzles, games—the usual for a snow day. What’s that?”

He placed the document on the upper level of the kitchen island and spun it around so Bethany could read it. Pancakes with real maple syrup from a local sugar shack and homemade whipped cream, another snow day tradition, made his stomach rumble. She stopped whisking the batter and mouthed her obvious question. “What the fuck?”

He shrugged as he poured coffee into two cups and then set one down on the stained cork coaster Bethany used for every drink she consumed—hot or cold.

“Dad, are you going to put on pants and a shirt? Jeez.” Iona, his oldest by six minutes, squirmed in her spot at the table while twisting the end of her braid with her familiar scowl of disgust.

“Right. It’s a bit nippy.”

Deanna, the younger twin, said, “Did you groom the driveway or clear it?”

“Your sledding run awaits.” Devon winked at Bethany. “At least our long steep driveway is good for something.”

Iona said, “All right.”

Devon came back into the kitchen wearing grey sweatpants and a thick sweater. A stack of pancakes, slick-wet with syrup and mounded with fluffy whipped cream, awaited him. The

document was gone, and he scanned the island as he eased into his chair to eat. Bethany flipped the next round of pancakes on the griddle and nodded to the top of the fridge. He kept forgetting the girls could read and were going through a nosy phase. Ensuring certain things were out of sight was still a novelty.

Soon, the twins excused themselves and dashed off to find their winter snow suits, gloves, and hats. Bethany poured Devon another cup of hot coffee, then slid into the chair across from him. It was odd for her to sit down at breakfast. Most days, she flitted about like a hummingbird moth packing lunches or cleaning up; she would stop every so often to fork a few bites of pancakes or eggs or toast into her mouth.

“What do you make of the document?” She picked at a crusted glob of batter off her shirt sleeve.

“No idea.”

“Your parents never spoke of it?”

“Not in front of me.”

Her gaze went to the sink full of dishes, but she remained seated. “Well, you would’ve burned the darn thing if you were going to let it go.”

“I wish I could ask Mom about it.” He set his fork on the plate and licked a small dollop of whipped cream off his finger.

“The staff has told your dear mother about your father’s death in the rare moments she’s lucid, but every morning she asks them when he’s coming to visit.”

“Most of the time, she believes she’s twenty-something and Dad’s a young stud wooing her.”

“I’m sorry, I truly am.” She used her fork to cut into the single bland pancake on her plate. “No one should have to go through what you’ve endured in the last few years. If one of my parents ever gets dementia, I’ll lose a large part of my core.”

“And I’ll be here for you.”

“Aww, thanks. Then you’ll find out it’s frustrating being helpless and unable to find more tangible ways to help ease another person’s pain.”

“Without you, I would’ve been pulped wood instead of the rock for everyone else.”

“Don’t make me blush before I’ve even got a half of cup of coffee in me.” She got up and went straight to the sink.

Devon sat in his chair for a few moments and sipped his coffee. The smell of Dawn liquid detergent filled the room. He stood up and took his plate, silverware, and napkin to the sink. She grabbed the dishes from him before he could hover and pretend like he would help. Her eyes sparkled as she gave him a quick reassuring glance. If he were beyond tears, she would even cry for him.

Before he could say anything, she shooed him away. He grabbed the document off the fridge and went down to stoke the fire. As he descended the stairs, the twin’s voices carried from their room, they were arguing over who should wear the pink upper bibs and matching parka from L.L. Bean. Any other day he would have intervened, but he was too deep in thought to judge their case or worse yet, moderate it.

He stuffed as many logs into the wood stove as he could fit and began picking up the papers and folders. With sweat beads on his brow, he sat down next to the remaining pile and started going through it—one piece at a time.

By noon, four papers dealing with his parents' custody of Joyce Sook Nguyen were in a neat stack. He read everything pertaining to her, twice, but he still had few answers to his questions. Any irrelevant document went into the stove, the grey ashen film of a years' worth of cell phone bills still glowed orangish-red at its core.

Bethany said, "Are you going to hang out down here all day?"

He was in midsentence of a dated obituary for a distant cousin when Bethany's words startled him, and he spun around so fast his knee—the sorest of the two—hit a piece of firewood. Again, he clutched his knee as if it were shattered. "Man, you scared the living hell out of me."

"That's a first." She crossed the room and stood next to him. "Whoa, you went through the files and papers from your dad's estate?"

"I came across more paperwork about the girl, but none of it answers the big questions about guardianship."

"There must be more information in the case records."

He let go of his knee and shook his head. "This happened over thirty-five years ago."

"What's to gain from getting to the bottom of this?"

"I'm not sure but shaking off the feeling I have to is becoming more difficult."

"My bloodhound. Why are you a scholar and not a detective?"

“I’m terrible at adhering to standard procedures and I love literature.”

She smiled and patted him on the shoulder. “The girls are waiting for you to come out for some epic sledding.”

“Argh, they just want me to be their human lift.”

“You spend as much time on the sled as they do, maybe more.”

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Fourteen days later, Devon was in the back room of the county clerk’s office scrolling through microfiche. It was the last effort he would put forth to solve the great Joyce Nguyen enigma. Every lead he started following brought him to places in his parent’s life he had shied away from for years and went nowhere near the topic in question.

The county clerk was an old high school girl friend who acted like their three-month fling ended days ago. Ashley let him access confidential records, so long as he did it while she was in the same room filing. He’d been at it for many hours when she left to go to the bathroom. Whenever she returned, she would give him a time’s up warning because it was well after six o’clock.

He was tired and kept nodding off as he scrolled and scrolled. Right as the door swung open, he jerked his head up and read the screen as if he were paying attention the whole time.

Ashley said, “All right sleepy man. It’s time to call it for the night.”

“Are you about done?”

“I finished up forty minutes ago, but you were so focused I would’ve regretted taking you out of the zone.”

“You should’ve. I’m sure you’d like to get home and be with your family.”

“Hubby is at work and we’re still working on the kiddos.”

“Oh. Well, thank you.” He grabbed a small stack of papers off the printer and picked up his jacket draped over the back of a chair.

“Have you tried searching the headlines?”

“What? No, just the records.” He contorted his face.

“Maybe you should try headlines. A fourth-generation white couple from Maine taking custody of a ten-year-old Vietnamese girl some forty odd years ago should’ve made local headlines.”

“Then why keep it a secret...if it was public knowledge?”

She walked over to a small desk in the corner and used the crook of her arm to heft her large purse off the top. “I’m not talking about page one material, even for the Bangor Daily News.”

“Hmmm, guess it’s worth a try.”

“Good thing for the world wide web, otherwise you’d have to wait for the library to open up and rummage through microfiche under the watchful eye of Mrs. Balteff.”

“Well, I’ll be seeing you around.”

“Not unless you need another favor from the county clerk.”

He tried to respond, but words failed to come forth. She led him out of the room, her brown eyes scrutinizing everything he did as if he was a curious social experiment. At the main

double doors, he reached out to shake her hand. She hesitated for a few moments, like his touch might bewitch her. When she clasped his hand, her grip was firmer than he expected. As they shook, he could've believed a lumberjack was jerking his hand up and down instead of an old flame who seemed daintier than before.

Devon said, "You know, it's not polite to nose around someone's personal documents when he or she is taking a break."

"Nor is it polite to gape at someone with stupefying pity, even if you've no idea you're doing it for hours at a time."

He nodded and walked toward his car, which sat alone in the empty parking lot. Although it was his third visit to the county office, he hadn't noticed or asked if she owned a car let alone anything about her home life. As he pulled out of the lot, he spied her in his rearview mirror. She locked up and began walking down the sidewalk toward the center of town. If he offered her a ride, it would be a short one. The darkness between two streetlights swallowed her up and her disappearance pushed the thought out of his mind.

At home, Devon ate a cold supper and rushed through the bedtime ritual as fast as his wife and daughters would allow. After the twins finished their homework and brushed their teeth, he offered to read them books, but they declined as they'd done for quite a few months. He tucked them into bed and went to his study, then flipped open his laptop. He was too amped to sit down in his executive chair, so he leaned over to type and use the mouse.

He went through dozens of headlines before he found the right one. The headline read: *Prominent Couple Provides Guardianship for 10-year-old Vietnamese Refugee*. The headline provided a bit of relief to the nagging question of why, but it also knocked his perception of his

parents out of alignment. They were good people, but by no means the humanitarians the short article made them seem.

Even so, if his parents were such great people, what happened to Joyce? Shouldn't he be calling her up to arrange Thanksgiving and Christmas visits or sorting out the next round of Secret Santa on Facebook's messenger? It seemed fitting he had no knowledge of this stranger from his parents' past, yet it was the oddest thing to encounter at his age. An illegitimate child would've caused less shock than this bizarre twist.

He printed the article and laid it on his desk. After another quick scan, he placed the page and half into his small case file—a manila folder on the corner of his desk labeled "Taxes 2000". While he was up, he poured himself two fingers of his rarest scotch and toasted the air to his parent's unusual little secret. His body was heavy, and he eased himself into his high back chair, then reclined it. Before long, Bethany entered and placed her hands on his shoulders.

She pointed to his glass. "Uh oh, the good stuff. You solved the case then?"

"So, it seems."

He scooped the file off his desk and held the article up. When she tried to take the paper, he jerked it away. She leaned over him and tried to grab it, but he held it out of her reach.

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk.* Maybe you should earn the knowledge like I did."

"Oh, should I?"

"Indeed."

She let go of his shoulders and towered over him. “I guess folding six baskets of laundry, changing the sheets, cooking dinner, and giving you no guff for being on a wild scavenger hunt—cavorting with your old high school girl friend no less—counts for nothing?”

“You could play along and make me feel like I’m at least a hint of the silver-tongued devil you fell in love with.”

“Why’s it my job to make you feel as if the one that got away was your wish and not hers?”

“It was my doing and..., ah, never mind. Here.” He handed her the article and made no attempt to play another trick.

She pivoted his chair to one side and slid into his lap, then picked up his drink. After a quick sip she set down the glass and began reading. He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes. The same exhaustion he encountered after solving the multitude of unknowns about his uncle flooded over every inch of him. Detective work, even as a hobby, was a tiring, and sometimes awkward, business.

She laid the paper on the desk and shifted her weight. “It’s over then?”

“I’m tired of chasing after some phantom.”

“There sure are a lot of unanswered questions.”

“True, but like you said what’s to gain from uncovering the full glorious details?”

She pointed to her neck. “Unlike last time, all the skeletons are visible or neutralized.”

“So, you’re saying I should dig and dig until the root and every hair on it is exposed?” He put his hands on her neck but waited to start massaging.

“I’m not saying any more about it.” She elbowed him to get her massage started. “This is your decision, your choice.”

“Cool. It’s done.”

“All right. Either take me to bed or stay here swilling pricey scotch by yourself.”

She got up and started to walk away. He leaned further back in the chair and kicked his feet up onto the desk. The chair creaked. She stopped and stared at him, then walked back to the desk. The glass of whiskey sat next to his legs and she picked it up. After swirling the light brown liquid in the glass, she held it up to the light.

She said, “You’re right. Only a fool would let this go down the drain.”

“Now, there’s your spirit.”

She brought the glass to her lips and took a sip. He sat up and reached for the glass to take his turn, but she cupped it in her hands and turned away. As she headed for the door he bolted after her and tried to get the glass out of her hands. Without much effort she fended him off and disappeared down the hall with him right behind her, pausing long enough to switch off the lights.

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The following month, Devon sat in the recliner in the living room reading one of his student’s essay detailing the overt homosexuality in Oscar Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. The twins were at the dining table working on homework. Every time one of them got up for a drink of water or to sharpen a pencil their chair would screech as it moved across the hardwood floor.

The amount of times the chairs scraped the floor became excessive and he set the ten-page paper on top of the stack covering the end table. As he pressed down on the ottoman to close it, Bethany entered the room. She shook her head and motioned for him to remain seated. He obliged and let the ottoman swing out until his legs were elevated.

She nestled up to him on the couch. “It’s pre-algebra, they’ll get it figured out and the distractions will diminish. Maybe not tonight, but soon.”

“How’re you so good at parenting and being a wife?”

“My mom showed me the way by being a better parent than I’ll ever hope to become.”

“Ever the eater of humble pie.”

“Here, you’re going to want to read this.” She pulled open her robe and fished in the folds.

“What is it?”

She handed Devon the file folder he had left on the corner of his desk and forgotten about. It was a lot thicker with dozens of additional pages stuffed inside of it. He held it in both hands to keep the contents from spilling out. Notes were scrawled all over the front cover in his wife’s handwriting: phone numbers, dates, names, and even a few of her famous doodles she crafted while on hold or in deep thought.

Devon cleared his throat and said, “You kept digging into the Joyce Sook mystery?”

“I was shocked you let it go without much fuss.”

“So, who was she?”

“Maybe you should earn the knowledge like I had to.” She spoke in her husky let’s-get-naked voice.

“Oh, hell yeah.”

She opened the folder and pointed to a piece of paper from a small notebook on top of the full-size documents. It was a seven-item honey-do list written in large letters with a bright red magic marker. As he groaned, she slid her hand up his chest and then began rubbing his neck, more screeches of the chairs came from the dining room.

“That’s what I’m talking about—don’t just read it, do it.”

“C’mon, my deal was fun and exciting, yours is cruel and unjust.”

“You can have a celebratory scotch after it’s all done.”

He began flipping through the pages in the folder. “*Argh*, well, now you’ve got to give me crib notes because I’ll never have time to go through all of this. Finals are killing me. And besides, I cleaned the garage a few weeks ago”

“Nice try, that was last summer.”

“No way...oh man, I guess you’re right.”

Bethany began guiding him to certain documents as she told him her discoveries. “She was the daughter of your father’s best friend in Vietnam. Carl Huttner fathered this girl while they served overseas, yet he never knew of her existence until the mother reached out to him nine and a half years later...maybe because the republic fell. When Joyce’s mother notified him of his daughter, he was already in hospice with stage four cancer.”

“I’ve never heard of this guy Carl.”

“Nor would you. Your father took his loss hard, and the way he dealt with it was to scrub him from memory. He wouldn’t even drive by the cemetery where he’s buried.”

“How do you know all this?”

“It took some effort and timing, but your mom’s rare lucid moments provided a lot of the details. However, some of it was good old fashion dick work.”

Devon held a paper clipping of Carl’s obit in his hand as if it might disintegrate. “You grilled my mom to get the nitty-gritties.”

“I was visiting with her anyways because you were too deep in classwork to go see her as much as you wanted. Besides, she seems to come alive even more when she’s gossiping about the past.’

“And what, my parents became her guardian because Carl died?”

“Yes, and no. Carl’s wife agreed to do it; a dying request sort of thing, but a month after Carl passed, she reneged. She never gave a reason why.”

“And then my parents stepped in?”

“She almost became your older adopted sister except her mother got into America by marrying a diplomat. After six months or so with your parents, Joyce moved to a grand estate in DC. She corresponded with your parents for many years but there’s no paper trail because your father would burn the letters as soon as they read them. After email became a thing all he had to do was press delete.”

“I guess it’s for the better and delving into it proved harmless unlike the fiasco with my uncle. I’m amazed you did this. How can I thank you?”

She wiggled the honey-do list in front of him, her grin as sultry as she could make it. He took the paper from her and nodded, then began folding it up. When he started to make the second crease, he noticed Joyce's full name, address, and phone number was on the back. He paused and met Bethany's gaze.

Bethany said, "Now some real detective work went into getting her contact info. She's a circuit court judge in the ninth district."

"California?"

"We could take the girls to Yosemite and Disneyland."

"What, call her up out of the blue and proffer to come visit?" Devon straightened.

"Sure, why not?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"If you chuck the entire folder into the woodstove or stack it on your towering get-back-to-it-some-year pile I'll understand."

"And the work list?"

"You've sharper than most, I'm sure you've got it memorized."

She nuzzled closer to him as he hugged her harder than he had in quite some time. For many minutes he held her close and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine what Joyce looked like as an adult, but the child in the photos donned a billowing black robe and held an oversized gavel. Would a woman—a prominent accomplished judge—even be interested in the past?

Bethany eased out of his arms and got up to check on the girls. He unfolded the paper with Joyce's info on it and placed the half sheet in with the other papers. After he closed the folder, he set it on the coffee table.

He tried to finish grading the essay, but the file became too distracting. Even so, it took the girls bickering over the sharpest pencil with the most eraser for him to give up his task. He snatched the file off the coffee table and went down the stairs. Hovering in front of the woodstove, he contemplated opening the door. The red-orange coals would make quick ashes of the file and its contents, yet there was no way to burn Joyce out of his head.

After many minutes he walked away with the folder cradled in his hands as if it contained government secrets. He found Bethany in the kitchen prepping the girl's lunches for the following school day. She set down the paring knife next to some carrot sticks and embraced him.

At first, a few tears slid down his cheeks. Soon, he was sobbing as hard as he had in a long time. His whole body shook so hard Bethany grabbed the counter widened her stance.

Bethany said, "Your father was a good man and you should be proud to cry over his loss."

He nodded and broke their embrace. After she wiped away his tears, he sidled out of the room and into the den making sure to avoid the dining room. Inside the room he shut the door and stood by the stack of folders, books, scraps of paper, and envelopes on top of a tall metal bookshelf. Bethany had dubbed his collection the get-back-to-some-year pile: a perfect term.

The familiar *thump, thump, thump* of the girls rushing upstairs to get ready for bed shook him out of his trance. Right before he stepped through the door, he paused. He went over and lifted a third of the pile off the stack and buried the file.

He breached the door and kept going, his mind number than ever before. Outside the twins' bedroom he leaned against the jamb and waited until they were ready for goodnight hugs and kisses.

End