

The Incinerated Life

Michael Overa

The detached garage is in severe need of painting and new gutters. Even more than the work that needs to be done to the outside, the inside needs to be emptied. For years Jasper's great-uncle Martin had packed the garage with the flotsam and jetsam of three failed marriages and six kids who would rather have nothing to do with him. And so it was left to Jasper to clean out the small house and garage to put the thing up for sale.

The downside of the whole thing—aside from the amount of time that Jasper would have to spend cleaning up—was that the sale of the house would barely cover the man's debt. There were two mortgages on the home, and Martin hadn't worked in decades. It was little wonder that the man had been found, his car still running, off of Old Highway 2. The coroner had quickly ruled it death by alcohol poisoning. It was a miracle that he had simply rolled to a stop on a shallow ditch beside the road.

Jasper hadn't seen something in his great-uncle that no one else had seen. It wasn't as though this old man had a heart of gold. He was an asshole, and now he was a dead asshole who was still being an asshole by making Jasper clean up the house. The old man had willed the whole thing to this great-nephew who had the heart to stop by a few times a year to check on the old man.

At forty, with two kids of his own, Jasper had little desire to fuss with the house.

"Burn it down and collect the insurance," his wife had said half-jokingly.

"If there were money in that, Martin would have done it himself."

"Then find the treasure map."

"This isn't the Goonies," Jasper said. "There will be no hidden treasure."

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Jasper stands on the gravel drive of the property. The house is in no better condition than the garage, but he assumes starting in the garage will be easier. Shortly after learning he was the sole recipient of Martin's property, Jasper had driven over to the house to survey things. He knew the house. The kitchen was stark and empty, and the cupboards were mostly bare except for a few cans of soup and a few cases of beer. He knew that the old man's chair would be angled at the TV and that beneath the TV, there would be several rows of VHS tapes and DVDs, half of which were pornographic.

The man had lived, thankfully, a somewhat spartan lifestyle inside the house. This, of course, was because everything else was shifted unceremoniously into his garage. Granted, it wasn't until recently that Jasper had made this discovery. The garage had always been there, taking up a corner of the lot, Martin's old Crown Victoria parked in front of the building. Jasper had assumed that this was because the car wouldn't fit, but he had no idea of the extent of the truth of that suspicion.

Entering through the building's side door, he found a narrow walkway between boxes and a workbench. The workbench was well-maintained. The tools hung on the pegboard wall, and there were rows of glass jars filled with screws, nails, nuts, and bolts of varying sizes. In a bin below the workbench were things that Martin had (presumably) salvaged from old machines: cords cut from appliances, small electric motors, ball bearings, and bike chains. There was even a fifth of whiskey and an ashtray with three packs of Camel cigarettes and two lighters.

Raising the garage door had taken some work. It was still a manual door, without an automatic opener, and Jasper had needed to use a hammer to break the rusted padlock before heaving the thing up. And then, when the door was open, he was confronted by another wall of boxes and junk stacked from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. This small corner of his uncle's material world had been the one that most mirrored his catastrophic personal life.

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The following weekend, Jasper returned to the property in the early morning. He would stay the weekend in his uncle's house, sleeping on the dead man's couch and cooking in the dead man's kitchen. After he'd carried his bag and groceries into the house, he returned to the garage to sift through the detritus.

To make things easier, he'd cleared a space for a bonfire. Anything that he could burn, he would. It would be too time-intensive and annoying to make trips from the house to the nearest dump. He knew that there was little in the garage that was likely to be worth much of anything.

In the first two hours, he had begun to sweat and itch. Dust from the boxes had started to stick to his skin and rubbed at the collar of his t-shirt. He'd flung three bike frames and several old appliances into a heap at one side of the garage. These he would be forced to take elsewhere. The other boxes were stuffed with things that had belonged to his kids: old report cards, essays, awards, artwork. At first, he paused over these things, trying to decide how best to ship them across the country to his second cousins. And then he'd realized that if they had not wanted to see their father, that the things might as well be burned.

And so here, by the end of the day was a mound of papers and old trophies and school photographs. Smiling faces. Kids on beaches and riding bicycles and clinging to the rope of a long-forgotten tire swing. Jasper gathered firewood from where it was stacked beside the house and built up a fire, spraying it down with lighter fluid to catch quickly. The pages turned to

feathery ash, and the pictures curled at the edges. The golden plastic of the trophies began to melt and bubble before disappearing entirely into the flames.

Jasper made his way into the front of the garage and retrieved the fifth of whiskey, pulling up an old bucket for a chair he sat watching the histories of people he barely knew incinerate. And it felt correct. This dissipation of memories into the ether. The final timbers of a life burning.

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