

Suzanne Heagy

John Wayne on Fire

Helen's father passed away at home on a Sunday in April. It was mid-morning, and I was drinking coffee and pacing around the living room, pausing to look out the picture window at incremental signs of spring. The front yard was greening and sprouting, unlike my bank account. The life insurance money I stashed when my mother died in 2011 was almost spent; the balance had fallen below four figures. I did not have my beloved mother's faith that God would feed this unemployed sparrow.

When my cell rang, I saw it was Helen and plopped down on the couch to take her call. "Hello. Sheila's answering service. How may I help you today?"

Helen coughed a sob and said, "Sheila, you never stop, do you? I'm calling about Arnold. My father. The funeral home just took him away. He died an hour ago."

I looked out at the sky, but didn't see any lost souls flying in the clouds. "Oh, Helen, I'm sorry for your loss. Are you okay?" I asked. "Is Lionel with you?"

"No, and yes. I mean, Lionel's at home with the kids. I'm here alone at my dad's house, and you're who I wanted to talk to."

I felt needed. I felt special. Helen wasn't in my bubble before the pandemic, but we had always stayed in virtual touch. I knew her father was seriously ill, and I followed her updates on fb. We'd known each other since grade school and actually bunked together during our senior class trip to D.C. in '01. During her father's short battle with Stage 4 liver cancer, she messaged me now and then. Once she texted, "Not a good day. Arnold had pain and shouted like a maniac." I texted back, "Shove a sock in his mouth. Not really. Sorry you had to hear

that, friend.” Her father had not been a nice person when we were in high school. Age didn’t seem to have changed him.

“I’m glad I can be here for you.” I said, “You know, you can cry if you need to. I couldn’t cry at my mother’s funeral because I felt numb, like it wasn’t real yet.” When my mother died in 2011, Helen unexpectedly showed up at the funeral. She hugged me in the receiving line and said, “Your mom was the best.”

Later that same year, her mother died, so I went to the memorial service at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church. Unlike me, Helen wasn’t struck by numbness. She fell to pieces and clutched her children, Amber, two at the time, and Andrew, who was five, all three of them sobbing at the end of the service. From where I sat, I saw Lionel lean in and shelter the family with his arm.

“Oh, Arnold is dead, and it’s real,” she said bluntly. “We can’t have a memorial service during a pandemic, so I don’t have to worry about that. The important thing is settling the estate as soon as possible and getting rid of this house. He’s lived alone since Mom passed away. Do you know what I’m looking at right now?”

I recalled the inside of Helen’s family home, which I hadn’t entered in years, a paneled living room with built-in shelves of books and pictures and knick-knacks. I said, “I remember shelves.”

She said, “You’re thinking about the living room. The shelves are only part of it. Every inch of this house has been collecting dirt and dust for a decade because he wouldn’t let anyone touch it. I had to scrub crusty goop out of the refrigerator before I could keep his milk in it. Did you know he only drank milk at the end? A half-a-gallon of whole milk a day, like a baby.”

She sounded distraught. I said, “He was lucky he had a good daughter like you to pour his milk for him. Give yourself some grace.” She quarantined from her family and attended to Arnold with the help of visiting VA hospice nurses for the last three weeks of his life.

She said, “I’m looking at the refrigerator. It’s completely covered with magnets. Guess what the theme is?”

“Hmm, girls in bikinis?”

“Ha, Arnold kept his porn in the basement where it belonged.”

The thought of Arnold and porn turned my stomach. He was squat and lumpy, like God pinched him out of play dough using only his thumbs. “What’s the theme?”

“Patriotic bullshit. Uncle Sam wants you, airplanes and mushroom clouds, and his favorite Hollywood soldier, John Wayne. Arnold called him the Duke. Don’t you remember, he shook Wayne’s hand once in Vietnam. He actually has a photo signed to him from Wayne stashed somewhere. We’ll find it when we’re cleaning out the house.” Arnold James Wladyslaw was a Vietnam vet and a regular at VFW Post 1912. I don’t know how much Helen’s father drank, but he had an alcoholic’s nose.

By “we,” I assumed she meant her and Lionel, or the company they hired to do the job. Then she added, “I don’t know what you’ve got going on, Sheila. But you’re the one I want to help me empty this house. Don’t worry, we can throw everything in a dumpster. I’d like to get started in a couple of weeks.”

To be honest, I didn’t have much going on. The pandemic had barely affected my life, unless it made me more of a sloth. The main change was that Keven was working from home full time for his employer, a government defense contractor, from his dedicated office space in the dining room made private by French doors. My main past times were cooking and eating, reading and looking out of windows, binging limited series on TV, and having sex whenever we felt like it and were both in the mood, maybe twice a week, maybe two days in a row. No occupation could tempt me out of the house. The last place I worked at was a Speedway, dealing with the unwashed public. I preferred living off love and careful withdrawals from my dwindling inheritance.

But Helen needed me. “I mean, I could probably help out some. But you know I’m not a heavy lifter. What’s your plan of attack?”

“We don’t have to sort anything. Everything has to go. Everything, straight into a dumpster. He was a borderline hoarder, Sheila. And no one wants to buy a dead man’s junk during a pandemic, anyway. I don’t need any keepsakes.”

Her loss was so recent, I wanted to bring her comfort. “Okay, I hear you. Yes, I will help you clean out Arnold’s house. Just let me know when, and I’ll be available.” Maybe the situation would change, and Lionel would step up.

But it was just the two of us that went to clean out the house a couple of weeks later. On a cloudy Tuesday morning, Helen picked me up. She brought Starbucks, which was a luxury because I usually drank store-brand coffee sans cream. I said, “You didn’t have to bribe me with Starbucks, but I appreciate it. Come pick me up whenever you want.”

Helen laughed and kept her eyes on the road. “It’s small thanks, believe me. I’m glad the weather is warming up, and life is settling down. I don’t have to quarantine in my own house anymore. I can hug my kids again. Last week, Amber cuddled up to me and said she missed the way things used to be, like last Christmas when the family went to Tanino’s before covid. That’s the last time she saw Arnold, but she didn’t talk to him. She asked did I think she hurt her grandfather’s feelings before he died.”

Helen stabbed the air. “No, I told her, absolutely not. My sweet girl doesn’t know it, but he barely knew her name. He called her Alice half the time.”

Once, when Helen’s son was a toddler, he broke a glass figurine at Arnold’s house, and Arnold smacked the kid a couple of times before Heather could intervene. She was so angry. She swooped her crying toddler up and walked out. She didn’t let her father see Andrew again for over a year. Just because he used to batter Helen and her mother around didn’t mean the generational trauma had to be passed on. Fortunately, Andrew was too young to remember the incident. She still went once or twice a month to see her parents, and then her father alone, usually without the children to maintain the peace.

She talked while navigating neighborhoods, turning right and left, until we reached our destination, a post-WWII ranch, rectangular and beige with a floor plan similar to every other house on the street.

Helen brought totes of cleaning and other supplies. She said, “I rented the dumpster for three days, just in case.” The fifteen-foot bin sat leveled on a slope beside the driveway with a ramp to make filling it easier.

Arnold’s house was as grimy as Helen had described; the living room darkly paneled, dusty, and stale, like an old junk store full of odds and ends collected without rhyme or reason. Then in the darkness, I noticed a pattern of cardinals. They were in every collection around the room, porcelain figures, decorative plates, a primitive painting, standing out amidst the bric-a-brac woven through with other motifs.

Helen had gone ahead into the kitchen and came back with two Solo cups. “We might as well make this a party. I call these cheesehead mules.”

The kick of ginger beer and vodka tingled my vascular system. I observed, “Your father must have liked cardinals. I see ducks and bluebirds too.”

“Did he?” she asked, sweeping back her glossy brown hair, a chic bob that she used to wear down to her waist in high school. “Too bad for the birds is all I have to say.” She raised her glass and said, “Here’s to bye-bye birdies!” She didn’t seem to be grieving, but then, she’d always been emotionally reserved.

We drank, and Helen looked around. “We can’t work in the dark. Let’s start by trashing the drapes,” and we pulled down the pinch pleated, ancient curtains that shrouded the living room.

When she said everything had to go, she meant it. We dropped everything into black garbage bags and cardboard boxes, our labor punctuated by the sound of breaking glass. The clouds dissipated, and light flooded in to illuminate rivers of disturbed dust. On the one hand, tossing everything was a waste of goods that held value elsewhere. On the other hand, it was Helen’s call when it came to disposing of her father’s estate, and a lot of it was junk.

My principal aim was not to overload a garbage bag or box until it was too heavy to carry to the dumpster. Emptying a house is grunt work. I preferred not to injure my shoulders or throw out my back. We had a dolly to cart out boxes, and the ramp made dumping convenient. We trashed a pocket watch collection, a fishbowl of historic matchbooks, two ceiling-high cases of VCR tapes so long compressed, their plastic covers stuck together. Arnold had ashtrays and nutcrackers, boxed replica race cars, a souvenir shop of old glass, and stacks of crumbling magazines and newspapers. He was a collector and a hoarder, and we threw it all away, not sparing a single teaspoon.

We worked steadily and cleared the living room, except for the heavy furniture, in a little more than an hour. As Kevin, my domestic partner, would say, it don’t take long when you know what you’re doing. After we hauled out the last garbage bag, we lingered in the sunny front yard to take a break and finish our drinks.

“We knocked the living room out,” Helen said with satisfaction. “I couldn’t have done it without you, Sheila. The only room I worked on while Arnold was sick was my old bedroom, which is officially empty. If we finish clearing the upstairs today, we can save the basement for tomorrow.”

I hadn’t planned to devote a second day to the cause, and I wasn’t interested in coming across Arnold’s porn. “I planned to mow the front yard tomorrow. Kevin said if I mowed the front, we could let the backyard

grow wild. It's for the bees and the butterflies and fireflies." A spring carpet of amethyst bugleweed was spreading toward Root River Parkway like a forest of tiny, purple trees.

I hated to disappoint Helen, but she only said. "Okay. I completely understand. You've already helped more than you know, Sheila. And you made me crack up when he was sick. What if today we clear out the basement? I can ask Lionel's sister to help me upstairs, or maybe I can convince Lionel to take a day off and help." Her husband was rarely around because his business was booming. During the lockdown, companies took advantage of covid dollars to upgrade their facilities. Wood might have been dear, but Wisconsin still had paint, and that was Lionel's specialty. Milwaukee Pigment, Inc., even offered interior paint that killed 99.9% of viruses and bacteria.

It was one thing to haul trash out the front door, another to drag trash up a flight of basement stairs. "I'm not sure I would be much help." I flexed my right bicep. "I'm a clumsy one-hundred-and-fifty-pound weakling, remember?" On the class trip to D.C., she had to take charge of my suitcase because no matter how I carried it, it bumped my knees and tripped me.

"We don't have to carry anything upstairs. We'll just bag it and box it for later. I'll have the guys who are taking the furniture haul the trash away too."

I thought of the song about being on a bear hunt. Can't go over it, can't go under it. Guess I have to go through it. "To tell you the truth, basements skeeve me out. Is it moldy down there? I'm allergic to mold. Are there spiders? What did Arnold have down there? What did he do down there?"

She turned and looked me straight on. "Well," she exhaled. "Arnold's treasures are in the basement. Nothing I was ever supposed to touch, unless I wanted him to break my fingers. I don't want to explain why I'm throwing treasure away. I don't want to have to answer anybody's questions, and I thought you'd understand."

"Alrighty, then," I said. "Let's take this party downstairs." We went in and made fresh cheesehead mules in the greasy shoebox of a kitchen, its clutter safe for another day. The stairs to the basement were by the back door. Helen flipped the lights on before we descended. Once I understood our mission, the basement didn't bother me at all. Helen didn't owe Arnold anything. She did her duty while he was alive. She deserved the filial equivalent of a Purple Heart.

We trashed his stamp collection and his coin collection, commemorative medallions and presidential plates. There were belt buckles, Zippo lighters, and small brass military figures. In the top drawer of a chest of drawers, we found the publicity photo signed to her dad from Wayne. It was wrapped in tissue in a plain white shirt box. The Duke was dressed like a cowboy with a toothy dog looking up at him. The scrawled autograph cut the actor off at the knees and read simply, "To Arnold, John Wayne"

"Hey," I said, "what was the dog saying to the Duke?"

Helen ripped the photo in half and dropped it into a garbage bag. "I don't know. Tell me."

"He said, 'I think you're the man who shot my paw.'"

She groaned. "No. No more dad jokes."

Once we had disposed of Arnold's treasures to Helen's satisfaction, we went upstairs, locked up the house, and she drove me home. I was getting out of the car when she said, "Listen, as soon as Tanino's opens back up, we want to take you and Kevin out to dinner. Today meant more to me than you know, Sheila. I didn't know who else to call."

I tipped an invisible hat. "My pleasure," I said, "See you after the pandemic."

In the house, I located Kevin working in his office and waved through the French doors to let him know I was home. Then I found my laptop and looked up the value of the autographed publicity photo of John Wayne. It was worth a small fortune, enough money to have kept me going for another four or five frugal months.

That night in bed, I elaborated on the story for Kevin and broke down and confessed that the insurance money from my mom was almost gone. The funds I contributed to monthly expenses would no longer be forthcoming.

"Is that all that's bothering you?" my loving partner asked. He drew me in with his left arm, and I reveled in the warmth of his body. "Sheila. I love and cherish you. Everything's going to be okay, okay? I make enough to get us through. After the pandemic, you can find a job. Maybe we'll even get a dog together. Do you want to have a puppy with me?"

Not really, I thought, no more than I wanted to rejoin the random public as part of the workforce grind. Maybe the pandemic would last so long, I'd never have to punch a clock again. Until then, my contentment and

devotion would have to be enough. "Maybe," I told him. "Someday. Who knows? For now, you can be my puppy."