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The Executor

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The Executor · Nicholas Delbanco

IT HAD BEEN snowing. This was the season's first storm, and the tamaracks were brown, not bare; oak leaves lay on top of the snow. Edward built a fire and huddled to it, then made himself a drink and settled to read. The letters were a jumble; they'd been thrown into a cardboard box that crumbled at the edges. Bits of paper came loose in his fingers, and he inhaled decay.

He had had trouble driving home; the weatherman used phrases like "snow advisory" and "traveller's alert." He had lived in Massachusetts for ten years. Yet every year, at the first snow, Edward felt just such a shrinking fear—as if he had to hibernate but would be unprepared. The Certificate of Death for Jason Simpson was a photostatic copy, black, reduced. Category 6a of the personal particulars read: "Usual Occupation (Kind of work done during most of working life, even if retired)." The examiner had typed in "Artist." 6b read "Kind of Business or Industry in which this work was done." This space was blank.

"You remember the Simpsons," his father had said.

"Barely."

"It wasn't *all* that long ago. They died in—let me see—1964."

"That's long enough," Edward said. "I was just finishing college."

"Yes. But you do remember them."

"A little," he admitted. His father's nostalgia was its own system: the stories he told seemed pointless, self-regarding. Edward (home for Thanksgiving, slicing the overlarge turkey, ignoring their questions about the divorce, telling his cousin, "The truth is, we woke up one morning and turned to each other and both said the same thing: 'Does it have to be this way? Do we have to go on for the next forty years?' And so we parted and it's perfectly amicable, no contest, automatic . . . ") bent to his plate.

"They loved *you*, apparently. Jason *and* Helen," his father said. "They wanted you to have this packet. *I'm* the executor."

Edward was preoccupied. He tried to scan the pattern of his father's emphases, then offered his aunt candied yams.

"*When* you're thirty-five years old," his father finished. "It's a stipulation. *Which* you are now. So *that's* their life story, this box."

"All right," he said. "And what do I do with it?"

"Take the thing home. Sell it. Burn it. Whatever you want; it's *your* business, Eddy, not mine."

Driving north the next afternoon, as rain turned to sleet then snow, he summoned up the Simpson's images again. They had been his father's

friends—thin elderly people, the man in a wheelchair, the woman's skin translucent. Even as a child, when the distinction in age mattered little, Edward knew his father's friends were a generation older: family dependents somehow, on the dole. Sometimes his father took Edward along, and the building smelled like a hospital. He remembered an apartment cluttered with canvas, vaporizers, and a blown-glass antelope they gave him that he broke. Edward was examining it—pleased beyond caution by the intricate fretwork—and shifting it from hand to hand when the pink creature fell. He remembered the small shattering—a tinkle more than crash, a little set of splinters at his feet—and the horror of having to sweep the thing up. Old Jason Simpson told him not to worry, never mind, but he picked every shard from the rug.

Some letters were in envelopes; some torn. His father's generosity was real. There were postcards and letters and offers of help, then the legal structures of support. His father sent them a small monthly check, arranging that ten other patrons do the same. His efforts on their behalf, with museums, with the landlord when he wished to raise the rent, with the City of New York when they required nursing care—were, it seemed to Edward, ceaseless.

Then he discovered his own scrawled thank-yous from twenty years before. If the Simpsons sent him an Indian headdress, he sent them a poem about it; when they congratulated him on his acceptance at Yale, he sent them a self-deprecating cartoon. Edward drew “a bulldog leading meek me by the leash,” and, half his life later, feeling the tug of propriety, recognized the truth in his cartoon. When they sent him a book about Joseph and the Nez Percés—the last gift; he'd turned twenty-one—Edward responded politely, saying that he'd had a waning interest in these matters and that they were kind to remind him. Later he had come to realize that the warrior-chief was emblematic to the aging Simpson: the admirable outlaw in him had been shot.

“Why are you giving me these?”

“They're yours,” his father repeated.

“They're valuable.”

“I wouldn't know. It's your *business*, Eddy; you're the curator.”

He said “curator” as others might say “doctor”; Edward changed the subject. “How are you feeling?”

“All right. I've been to Meyrowitz.” His father shrugged. “I'll live.”

“What about for the holidays? If you'd like to come . . .”

“Eddy, I can't carry this with me any longer. There's only so much I can keep in the closet. Do you follow? What'll happen to these things, I ask myself; someone should make sense of it—you're thirty-five—not me.”

His father coughed. It had taken him years to propose that Edward's life was wanting; he had not been reproachful. They rarely met; his father

carried independence to the point of indifference, Edward complained.

“That’s reciprocity. His trade-off,” Marcia said. “It’s how you used to behave.”

Art—Edward had spent his life at it: handling and appreciating and assessing and paying the freight. He bought and sold and owned and restored it, always respectful, curatorial—always, he told himself, bored. Why should a man as sane and sweet as Jason Simpson seemed—why should a figure so compounded of decency, ambition and a stubborn sense of making—make no difference finally? Write in water, paint in sand; scan the *New York Times* each Christmas for the mention of your year’s accomplishment and year by year accept oblivion because Picasso and ten others reap rewards.

There’s no madness, Edward thought, like that of the gambler in arts; the horseplayer, lottery addict, the lady at the one-armed bandit dawn by dawn in Vegas all have better odds. He had renounced such tinkering, the arrogant humility of craft. But now he handled the receptacle of some long-dead adept’s efforts, and he had to read it through.

There were letters from men who went to Pamplona in the wake of Hemingway, and girls who learned to cook with Alice Toklas. In the thirties the notes were trilingual—spiced with German phrasing, laced with Italian or French; notes from England in the forties made no mention of the war. There were thank-you letters, Christmas cards, apologetic letters for the length of time we’ve been apart and promising to write more often soon. There were lawyers’ letters, bills, receipts, the leavings of the fifty years that Simpson had spent scrambling for a toehold and safe perch. His wife received few letters; he was the family scribe. There was a packet of his correspondence when her illness kept them separate, or when he worked in California making murals for three months.

John Marin sent a map to where they spent the summer. Someone had scrawled in the margin, “Hope you’ll find it possible to visit! Dew Drop Inn!” E. E. Cummings thanked the Simpsons for their birthday gift, and Steiglitz, answering a request for assistance, countered with needs of his own. Girls Edward had never heard of sent back impressions of Paris; a woman on an ocean liner sent them sketches of the waves. The language was formal or tub-thumping, the writing meticulous—Marianne Moore’s—or barely legible—E. Walsh’s. There was such a sense of energy, of time forever on their side, of the instant’s immortality for all that generation—Thomas Hart Benton hoped Jason would feel better after his damned stroke.

Wind forced the cat-door open; Marcia had taken the cats. When he closed the door again the latch proved inadequate, so Edward propped a log against the door. Wind found its perimeter and blew past the four sides; the door needed weather-stripping. He imagined the chill rectangle advancing

till it shaped itself, intact, upon the room's far wall. He rearranged the logs.

He himself had hoped to be an artist, once. He'd bought, as he told Marcia, the great American dream. This consisted of paint-spotted tweeds, an unlit pipe, unruly hair, the wild-eyed glint behind sunglasses that signified a man could *see*. He wrote a set of villanelles, painted an acrylic version of "The Rape of the Sabines." He conceived a three-act theatre piece about the life of Byron, entitled "Curious George," to be performed in drag. When a decade later Fellini brought out his version of the life of Casanova, Edward was convinced he'd had authentic inspiration way back when.

But he'd always known himself, he claimed, you had to give him that. Even at twenty he'd suspected what his twenties proved: that art was a necessity for others, luxury for him. It's what to do when the dishes are done; it's not flourishing in China where they force-feed equality.

So Edward painted as an avocation, not vocation, but quite well. His degree was in art history, and he took a job, when twenty-eight, as assistant to the Curator of Prints and Drawings in a museum in the Berkshires that was privately endowed. His reticence seemed pleasing; his ignorance had been construed as modesty by the dowager who hired him. She owned a Jason Simpson drawing of the Statue of Liberty in rags; it was inscribed to his father, and she had recognized the name.

The work was undemanding, and he settled in. He organized the files, reorganized the cabinets and had the Flemish collection uniformly framed. He rented a small white clapboard farmhouse on the edge of town and, once assured of permanence, he bought. The last time we changed staff, his secretary said, was after the Titanic sank. At a black-tie testimonial dinner in honor of the donor of a set of Goya etchings and a portrait by Frans Hals, he met his future wife. Marcia was the director's niece, up for the fall foliage, she said, just mad about the oaks. When he realized that she said this with the edge of mockery, not meaning "mad about the oaks" but meaning to establish that she thought the phrase was foolish, and the celebration, and the solemn owl-eyed scrutiny of the Capriciosos, Edward asked her to come home with him for a post-prandial snort. "If you mean coke," she said, "I'm off the stuff."

"I didn't mean that," Edward said.

She also noted mockery and, noting this, accepted him; they shared a bottle of Remy Martin.

That night he built a fire, heralding the fall. "I usually don't drink this much," she said.

"Say 'usually' five times," he said. "If you get the last one right you're sober anyhow."

"Usually, usually, usually"—she paused for breath and laughed. He watched her red hair glinting in the firelight, the coppery tones and cheek-

bones that seemed Indian in emphasis, and said, "All right. You've proved it. You're the perfect figure of sobriety."

"Picture of sobriety," she said. "That's what you mean. Not figure."

They kissed. They fell against each other on the hearth like warriors. Three months later, when they married, Edward said he felt like someone returned triumphant from a distant war; Marcia said she knew exactly what he meant. They honeymooned in the director's cottage in St. Croix.

His job was secure; they owned the house and two cars. Upon occasion he set up his easel in the garage but, even painting still-lives, or attempting portraits of his new bride with coconuts, Edward knew the work was a diversion, something to do with the past.

Simpson made rag dolls; he collected katchinas. He had an eye for horses and did variations on a circus-theme. He was a colorist whose city-scapes and sea-scapes used the same shade of blue. "What do you think of this painting?" he'd asked.

Edward studied it, shy.

"Don't be embarrassed," said Simpson. "Just tell me what you see."

"See?" He squinted at the riot of color and shape—this would be the last time they met.

"Don't *read* it. Don't tell me what you want to see. Just describe what's there."

Helen nodded, encouraging. She had a plate of sugar cookies and she gave him two. He chewed one; it tasted of oil.

"I mean *literally*, boy."

"There's a dancer," he said. "There's what looks like a camel he's leading."

Simpson took a cookie also, and he held it poised. With his left hand he turned the wheelchair full circle.

"Maybe that's a tower, I can't tell," said Edward. "The green thing sticking up back there. Maybe a windmill. Or trees?"

"You're just pretending." Simpson licked his lips. "You've lost the gift of sight, my boy. It's not your fault. It's how they've taught you; everything you've learned for all those years."

"It *is* a windmill," Edward said.

"You were closer the last time. 'That green thing sticking up back there.' That's what you saw."

Helen patted his arm. "Don't worry," she offered. "We all forget what we knew. What do you see, for instance, when you look at Jason?"

"A man about sixty. With white hair. A painter. Your husband."

"No," Simpson said. "Wrong again. You were right about the white—the rest of it, though is invention. Accurate invention, as it happens, I grant you that. Sixty-seven. But what you *saw* was this green shape you're thinking should be 'sweater'; what you see is orange here, and a blue mass above

it, then two brown things that, for the sake of convenience, we'll call pants. You've got to make the world up, boy, see it as you saw it when you only saw the undersides of sinks." He threw his arms out, theatrical. "The day you decided those pipes and that bowl meant 'toilet'—function, not form—that was the day you went blind."

Edward added ice. Suddenly he understood the reason for their gift. The old man must have seen him as a caretaker, curatorial even then. So this bequest was self-serving also, not selfless or random. Edward knew he'd seemed the logical successor to his father's stewardship—the next supporter, Jason might have said, by right of bourgeois birth. They'd predicted his career. If he hadn't ended up in the back offices of some Berkshire museum, he'd nonetheless have access to the place. Jason must have guessed as much—had been responsible, even, in the course of that first interview, for Edward's very hiring and would expect compensatory thanks.

He poured a second scotch. He stretched, switched off the reading lamp. That he should be predictable—who'd lived his professional life in order to encourage and justify just such prediction—irritated him. He drank. He said aloud, testing the phrase, "They've left me holding the box." He thought the substitution amusing, mildly; he bit the chill rim of his glass.

Then the irritation passed and he stared at the fireplace. It was deserved, after all, and there'd been value in the gift; he could sell the notes by Cummings and the map Marin had drawn. He could turn their loss to profit, judiciously, then pay his father back. Edward felt his concentration slacken and release. Whatever problem he'd been set to solve was slipping from him cozily. He shifted his weight, stretched again. And in the succeeding instant felt pure rage—shock after shock of it, jolting. He stood. His adult life held no such anger—he was a child again, biting the bedspread, kicking at whatever he could kick. He tore at his nails with his teeth. Out beyond the bedroom was expectation's tyranny: he was nothing original, nobody, never had been or would be.

Edward threw a birch log on. It came to him—alone, in his well-appointed house in the foothills, standing by the fieldstone fireplace, with its oak mantle bearing Tibetan woodblocks (four of them acquired from the Victoria and Albert, of elephants with maidens on their jewel-encrusted tusks, the great-limbed heroes dancing) that he would leave. Madagascar, Malta, Mozambique—he repeated such names to himself like a litany, softly, embracing escape. He pressed his nose to the living-room window and peered out. The tamaracks were dark.

Marcia would be with her lover now in Roland Park. She'd acquired children—three from his first marriage—and would, Edward imagined, be making turkey soup out of their supper's leavings. She'd stand at the counter he never had seen, but wearing the apron he'd bought her (or maybe

something with oysters and lobster and trout on it, since she lived in Maryland, some chef's hat over pastry shells that spelled, "Welcome to Chesapeake!") ladling soup. He could imagine it precisely: the size of the carrots she sliced, the stalks of celery she'd wash with brisk inattention, the herbs that she'd toss in for taste.

"What you don't understand," she told him, "is ambition. It's wanting to count in this world."

"No."

"Yes. To make a difference. To be able to say, when you walk in a room, 'I matter. I'm here. This is me.'"

"That's vanity," said Edward. "Or arithmetic. You're talking addition."

"Ambition."

"Count," he repeated. "A *difference*. Assertiveness training, that's all."

Then she seemed deflected by his parrying agility, and they made their peace. She wanted a shower, she said. They agreed that they each had been right. She had come back from jogging, and was still in her exercise suit.

"I'm leaving you," she said that night.

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"And who are you going to?"

"Edward . . ." she began.

"Notice I didn't ask *where*. Notice I know that it's someone, not somewhere." He focused on her ear. There was a turquoise pendant that he could hook his finger in, then tear.

"Harrison."

"In Baltimore?"

"Roland Park," she said. "There's a difference."

"He's the one with all those brats?"

"They're not brats."

"I'm only saying what you said. You called them brats, remember? Why'd you pick that one?"

Marcia sighed. She spread her hands. She said, "You flatter me. I didn't have all that much choice."

Therefore he piled the sheets—precisely, using paper clips, then rubber bands for decades. He filled the box again. The folder for the forties bulked least large. The fire snapped and crackled at him, and he fed it with a pine bough that hissed, popped. "It is my wish that I be cremated. Please take care of this matter." Edward knew the indicated gesture now was to feed this fire with the ranked packets before him. The flame was picture-perfect, the length of the birch log: high, hot. He rearranged the box. He pictured its consumption: first brown, then black, then crepitant, a shapeliness adhering to itself.

For several minutes, still, he conjured them. Their death had been a release. He studied the certificate and its grim declension: of natural causes, attested, in triplicate. They had lived together fifty years, and he was separated after four. He found a postcard addressed to the hospital in East Islip, where Helen had been sent in 1932. "Grüss Gott," the legend read. "I send you all my love, my darling, and hope things improve for us always." There was a watercolor of a man on a horse, doing a handstand with a beachball on his upraised foot; the sweep of the balancing act carried across to the stamp.

He would not, at any rate, burn the letters. He stood and stretched and took the box outside. There was ice on the trees. He wore no coat or gloves and shivered largely, inhaling. Edward smelled his own fire's down-draft; the sky was clear. His wife had planted tulips in abundance just before she left him, saying, "Why not, after all, what else would we do with these bulbs?" He'd helped her make a flowerbed beneath the western wall. That ground was clear, protected from the blowing snow, and warm enough yet so that what landed was melting. He placed the carton, carefully, in the center of this wet dark strip. It would weather the winter, then shred.