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Whole Life

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Goolsby: Whole Life

WHOLE LIFE

BY

JESSE GOOLSBY

When I was fourteen, pairs of well-suited men began to show up unannounced in our kitchen. I'd get home from basketball practice and there they'd be, crouching around our worn dining table, jabbing at papers as my parents nodded along. They made no effort in my direction, but it didn't bother me. I knew they were insurance men, *life insurance* men. Not that I thought about life insurance, how it worked, or why my parents happened to be in the market for a policy. The men could have been selling dog food for all I cared. But one night, after the latest set of buttoned-up men fled, my mother sobbed while warming water on the stove. She wasn't a crier, and I could have asked her what the matter was, but Jordan was playing the Celtics on Channel 19, and I was fourteen.

I knew mom had diabetes. I knew she had to wear a gray, six-inch, rectangle insulin pump on her hip. She

had to plan things out carefully if she wanted to go swimming. Beyond that, I wasn't interested. I've always wondered if my mother received a death date, if, during a tense hospital visit, the doctor looked across the table, apologized, glanced down, whispered: *June 6, 1996.*

If the visit happened, I never knew. I'm not mad that my parents withheld the date. There were enough clues if I wanted to pay attention: mom going legally blind, her growing fear of standing, truckloads of dialysis fluid, steady insurance men traffic.

My mother cried and shook in the kitchen because she was alive and uninsurable. The expectedness of her death had become probable and close, and yet she inhaled and stood, and added macaroni to the boiling water. My father came and took her face in his hands and kissed her on her lips. I knew they loved each

other, but anything longer than a public peck kiss was unusual. I glanced over, but they ignored me. My father ran his fingers down her blue blouse, and then pulled her close, keeping his right hip angled out away from her injection site.

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How do you buy life insurance for someone dying? Most would say it's impossible, and perhaps they're right. But in my home, one more pair of insurance pushers stopped by. The older one with gray hair ran his hand over my head like I was his own. His crumpled suit struggled to cover his bulging mid-section. He and his partner came back, time and again, and after one particular visit I knew they would never return because my mom hugged them and kissed them on the cheeks and my father shook their hands and hugged them, and that night my parents didn't make me fill the wood box for the fireplace. They ordered a pizza for each of us—black olives and mushrooms for mom—and they let me drink Martinelli's sparkling cider from a champagne glass.

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I was seventeen when I saw my dead mother in an Enloe Hospital bed in Chico, California. Her mouth was open, and the bundle of matter that she carried around as a body lay there quietly. She seemed so light, and, when my father suggested I touch her, I strode to the

bed and pushed her cheek with my index finger. Later that evening, my father, my twelve-year-old sister, and I climbed into our green Ford Aerostar van and started the hour and a half drive home to Chester. We drove up Highway 32, through golden hills with ancient rock fences, above forested canyons with hidden arrowheads, and up into the Sierras. We didn't say much, and, after a prolonged quiet, my father reached up and pressed the stereo's power button. The song was "One Sweet Day," a song about meeting loved ones in heaven. It was improbably appropriate, and I let the chorus spill over me until my clean-voiced father smacked the radio and said, "Turn that shit off." So we rode in silence, and once in a while I'd look at my sister in the backseat, staring at the rushing trees with her hands in her lap. And after what seemed like a thousand turns, we rounded the final curve, and off in the distance I saw our lit town's main street, and, to the right, our lake in the darkness, and, while it would never be the same, it still felt like home.

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My father didn't talk about the insurance money, but I knew it was already in the bank when the man in black came over and opened a catalog of caskets on our kitchen counter. I sat next to my father and listened to the man talk to us about wood grain and silk linings. I knew

my mother wanted to be buried in a simple, unvarnished pine casket, but the sunny afternoon we lowered her into the rocky ground outside of town, my father closed a polished hardwood coffin so heavy it took eight of us to lift it from the hearse.

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My mother was buried in the Chester cemetery in white garments that she believed would identify her as a chosen one in the afterlife. We didn't put her song books, her paychecks from US Bank, her sunscreen, or our family's photo in the casket. If someone were to open her coffin one day and try to make sense of her life, they may guess only that she preferred the color white.

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When I graduated university and settled into my job, the first thing I did was buy whole life insurance. I read all about it, how it wasn't the best investment, how I could lose money with inflation. Even the insurance man said, "You sure you want whole life?" I did. I have three policies in total, and sometimes, when a sad song plays, I think about the value of my death. I think about my death date, and my wife and young children. If faced with my parents' situation, I'm sure my wife and I wouldn't tell our children.

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I don't know what any of the numbers mean. Perhaps I simply want to be alive for as long as possible, and

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that monthly premium is a price I pay to breathe and remember.