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Graveyard Picnic

By Jackson Cook

When Aldous Beaumont, Sr., kicked the bucket in a scorching motorcycle accident at the age of seventy-three, there weren't many kind words to say about his time on Earth. He was a rotten troublemaker whose only gift seemed to be causing havoc in the lives he came into contact with. Anyone foolish enough to ever trust Aldous Beaumont, Sr., would find themselves robbed and cheated. He even went so far as to steal every penny from his disabled mother, Emmeline Beaumont, leaving her penniless for the last twenty years of her life.

The job of disposing of Aldous Beaumont, Sr., was initially given to his eldest son, Aldous Beaumont, Jr., who didn't feel that his father deserved any of the dignity or attention that a traditional burial ceremony might offer. Instead, he had his father cremated. The crematorium places the remains in a vacuum-sealed bag inside a black container that snapped shut. Aldous, Jr., put that container in an old Amazon cardboard box and shipped him off through the U.S. Postal Service to his father's cousins, Dwayne and Rose Laurent, who still lived by Aldous, Sr.'s hometown, Madison, Arkansas.

Only a few yards outside the city limits of Madison was a peaceful farmhouse. At the end of a winding gravel driveway was a screened-in porch. Inside the white front door was an expansive living room with four chairs and a couch. It was a room designed to host company. The back of the living room lead to the kitchen, a space covered in red linoleum with pots hanging from hooks on the ceiling. Wooded cabinets held a variety of culinary gadgets collected from catalogues and general stores. The fridge was a vessel for dozens of jars filled with homemade strawberry jam made by Rose Laurent. Rose was a former English teacher and a militant grammarian. Her hair curled above her head, and her glasses rested on the end of her nose. She was often overcome with a hankering for sugary, gooey strawberry jam on buttered toast. This came into direct conflict with the seemingly never-ending diet she was on. So, instead of eating any of the jars in her fridge, she simply made more. She would explain to anyone wondering (or, more accurately, anyone willing to listen) that this always seemed to cure whatever temptations she had. People would sometimes consider reasoning with her, but everyone knew it would be a useless gesture to argue with Rose.

Her husband, Dwayne Laurent, was a recently retired farmer dressed for work, except for his shoes. Dwayne had recently purchased a pair of black Air Force 1's. Anyone under the age of twenty-five knew that it was a sign someone was lawless and violent if they were wearing black Air Force 1's. However, to him, they were a durable sneaker and a more comfortable alternative to his old muddy work boots. The fireplace at the end of his feet, smoking to an end, made the room smell like pine needles and newspaper. He was half asleep leaning back in his recliner when Rose woke him up.

Rose shook Dwayne, "Go get some more wood to keep the fire going."

"Yes, dear," Dwayne responded out of obligation. Under normal circumstances, Dwayne Laurent would not be caught dead going outside in the middle of a January freeze. However, the stash of firewood on the screened-in porch was entirely depleted. He was okay with bundling up inside, but his beloved wife, Rose, insisted on a fire. When the mail truck arrived, Dwayne was wrapped up in his heaviest camouflage hunting jacket, walking to the barn, which had been falling apart for the past eight years, for his last load of wood.

Dwayne paused to watch as the mailman, Cletus Burks, rolled past the mailbox and into the winding gravel driveway. He raised his gloved hand in the air as a motionless wave as the mail truck pulled in next to him. Cletus leaped out of the truck armed with his clipboard and an old Amazon box.

Dwayne greeted, "Staying safe on the roads, Cletus?"

"Yessir, Mr. Dwayne. I'm trying to, at least. They've got chains for our tires today," he replied, "I have a package that you need to sign here for." Dwayne accepted the clipboard from Cletus. He dug his reading glasses from deep inside his pocket and looked over the document.

Without looking up, Dwayne announced, "I don't recall ordering anything off Amazon."

"Mr. Dwayne, I don't believe it's from Amazon. There's no return address on there," Cletus responded. Dwayne exchanged the clipboard with the beaten-up box. He studied the amateur taping and an original label hiding beneath the new one.

"Well, suppose it's something dangerous? I hate to keep you out here in the cold, but would you mind standing here for a moment while I open it?" asked Dwayne. Before getting an answer, Dwayne ripped into the box and discovered the little black container with a note taped onto it. Cletus tried to decipher it from upside down as Dwayne read the letter aloud.

Dear Cousin Dwayne and Cousin Rose,

Inside this box, you will find the ashes of Aldous Beaumont, Sr. I apologize that I did not call first to ask if you would do this. Honestly, I didn't want to be accountable for my father's ashes a moment longer. Although I never thought much of my father, it would be nice if his ashes were spread at the family plot in the Madison Baptist Church Cemetery. If it is not any extra trouble, a video of the casting would be appreciated. Hope y'all are staying healthy and safe. I still appreciate everything y'all did for my grandmother before she passed away.

Thank you,

Aldous Beaumont, Jr.

"Mr. Dwayne, sending ashes through the U.S. Postal service is a federal offense," Cletus looked down at Dwayne's black Air Force 1's. "I'm not going to say anything, of course, but y'all shouldn't be doing this again."

Dwayne assured Cletus, "I believe this is probably going to be a one-time deal. It's fitting that a crime was committed to deal with Aldous's remains anyway. He was a uniquely disgusting dirtbag." Dwayne finished signing the clipboard and waved Cletus off.

The roads were too dangerous to spread Aldous, Sr., that day. Dwayne walked down to the barn and stuck the remains in a safe place away from any small animals finding shelter. He grabbed the last load of firewood, then returned to the house. There was never any intention to retain Aldous in the barn. He told Rose precisely what happened and let her read the letter. Surely, they would have time tomorrow to go spread Aldous. However, the roads were too dangerous for another week. Once the weather finally warmed up, the Laurents had forgotten that Aldous was still in the barn. It wouldn't be until a different funeral when somebody asked Rose if she knew where they could go say some final words to Aldous, Sr., that she remembered he had been in the barn for months.

During the summer, Dwayne and Rose were frequently joined by their grandson, Hucksley Laurent. Almost every weekend, he would make the hour drive from Little Rock to hunt and fish on the family's property in Madison. The first Saturday of July, Hucksley spent the entire morning cleaning Dwayne's red Chevrolet truck after caking it in a layer of mud the previous day. He was wearing dusty pair of his uncle's red swim trunks that Rose still kept in a drawer. They were decorated in seagulls and pineapples. Hucksley had hoped to be done before lunchtime. Which was to be whenever Dwayne and Rose returned from the funeral they had left to attend that morning. Rose had explained how Hucksley knew the deceased during breakfast, but he had already forgotten.

He was standing in the bed of the truck when Rose's Chevrolet Suburban peeled into the driveway, throwing up gravel behind it. Dwayne threw on the parking brake inches away from the truck, swung the car door open, and ran towards the barn faster than Hucksley had ever seen him move.

He looked at Rose right as she screamed, "WE FORGOT ALDOUS!"

Hucksley balanced the black box of Aldous's ashes between the legs of his swim trunks in the back seat of the Suburban. He had not been allowed to change out of them before their trip to the graveyard. Rose had explained to him that there was not enough time. It did make him feel a little silly because Rose and Dwayne were still dressed up for the funeral they had just attended. Dwayne had asked Hucksley at breakfast if his all-black suit made him look like Johnny Cash. Rose thought it made him look like a Catholic Priest. They passed by the fast-food restaurants by the interstate and headed to town.

On their way to spread Aldous, Rose insisted on picking up their niece, Valorie, to have an additional witness at the casting. They stopped at her store, a combination boutique, café, and antique store; It was one of the few remaining stores in the area. The space itself used to be home to the local newspaper, and the smell of ink hadn't left the walls yet. The shop was painted a garish shade of bright green. The technical term for Hucksley's relationship with Valorie had always eluded him. But, even if he knew it, he would end up calling her Cousin Valorie either way.

Dwayne and Rose got out of the car and invited Hucksley to go in. He was unsure of whether he should leave Aldous in the vehicle. It seemed a little rude to carry around human remains inside a store. Especially one where food was prepared and sold. However, what if Aldous was stolen out of the car? There was absolutely no protocol for this situation. Hucksley decided he should bring the black box with him into the store but try and be tasteful. If he was lucky, he could get himself a pimento cheese sandwich out of this stop. It was the most popular item at Valorie's café, and the time was beginning to get past a comfortable lunchtime. Hucksley was unsure how long this adventure was going to last.

Immediately inside the store, in the part sectioned off as a boutique, was Valorie's father, J.W. (pronounced Jay-Dubyah), one of the final remaining "Arkies." His family had been one of those depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*. J.W.'s parents were farmers who had gone out of work during the dustbowl and migrated to California to become fruit pickers. After bouncing around the country, he landed back in Arkansas and got hitched with Rose's sister. J.W. was the greeter inside Valorie's. However, it was unimaginable to not find him asleep in his giant overstuffed Lay-Z-Boy recliner.

Rose scrambled to the antique section to locate Valorie. Hucksley wondered how someone would start an antique store. He imagined having a few relatives that died close together and getting stuck with their old belongings. He wouldn't have any use for it, but it would be difficult to toss away what felt like a loved one's entire life. So, it seemed like a logical next step to open up a small shop to put all of those loved one's personalities and consumerism on display. All while attracting young, out-of-town couples and moms with an irrational obsession with broken lamps to come spend their money on some of it.

Dwayne kicked the Lay-Z-Boy into the sitting-up position, startling J.W. out of his dream.

"Morning, J.W.," said Dwayne.

J.W. adjusted to his new surroundings and responded, "Hey, Dwayne! Got your grandson with you today?"

"Yup, we've got to go over to the graveyard and spread Aldous. Rose wanted to stop by and talk to Valorie about something or other."

"Now, didn't that piece of work pass a couple of months ago?"

"Sure did, but you know how it is with cremations and such. Not as much of a rush when you don't have a decomposing body to get in the ground," Dwayne insisted.

"I suppose so. Is the boy holding Aldous right there?"

Hucksley snapped back into the conversation, "Yessir. Would you like to hold him?"

"That's alright, boy."

Rose came back to the front of the store, dragging Valorie behind her. Valorie was dressed in a work shirt covered with drying dish soap from working in the kitchen and block heels. Her eyes doubled in size when she saw Hucksley holding Aldous against his chest.

Valorie let out a shrill scream, "Oh my GOD, I know that you did not bring him in my store."

"I couldn't leave him in the car," Hucksley retorted. "What if someone were to steal him?"

Valorie shook her head, "Why would someone steal ashes? What would they even do with them, Hucksley?" Hucksley hadn't arrived that far in his thought process. It was a valid point.

Hucksley asked, "Could I maybe go into the café and grab a pimento cheese sandwich?"

Valorie pointed, "Get out!"

He let Valorie win this argument and excused himself and Aldous before walking out the front of the store. He sat outside on a bench and looked around town. According to his grandfather, there used to be a bustling social scene in Madison. However, these days it resembled ruins more than shops. Broken glass and graffiti decorated the sidewalks. Some buildings had collapsed on themselves so long ago that trees are growing inside them. By the time Hucksley was Dwayne's age, perhaps a meadow will have grown on top of the decomposing city.

Rose, Dwayne, J.W., and Valorie walked out of the store. Hucksley held the Suburban door open to allow J.W. and Valorie to climb in the back.

Before he could join them, Valorie announced, "I don't want Aldous sitting by my feet. What if he spills? I'm wearing open-toed shoes!"

"There's a bag inside the box," replied Rose.

"That could still come open. Hucksley, could you put him in the back of the car?" Valorie retorted.

"Well, I don't want him going all over the back of my car," Rose snapped.

Hucksley suggested, "What if I just keep holding onto him?" Rose and Valorie agreed that this was good enough. Valorie buckled her seatbelt. J.W. sat in the middle seat crushing Hucksley against the door. He laid his chin on the black box and kept telling himself that it was only a five-minute drive to the graveyard.

The Madison Baptist Church Cemetery had significantly expanded in the past thirty years. You could see how the headstones were nearly falling apart next to the tree line but were almost brand new the closer you got to the creek. The Beaumont family plot was almost in the middle of all of it. They occupied a prime part of the cemetery underneath a giant crepe myrtle tree. The newest headstone in their plot was Aldous's mother. Hucksley and his family arrived in Rose's Suburban.

"Dwayne, do you remember where we buried Emmeline?"

"I think I remember it being underneath that tree," Dwayne answered.

"No, I don't recall ever even seeing that tree. I think it was closer to those trees over there," Valorie added while gazing outside the window, trying to remember. J.W. was snoring in the backseat next to Hucksley.

"I remember the tree because a branch almost hit J.W.," Dwayne asserted.

J.W. heard his name and snapped awake, "Hey, there! What's going on?"

"We're trying to find Emmeline, J.W.," Rose groaned.

"I remember her being beneath a tree. The branch almost hit me," J.W. yawned. Dwayne smirked at Rose as he parked the car opposite the crepe myrtle. She rolled her eyes. They unloaded themselves from the Suburban and walked over to Emmeline. Rose walked around and took two pairs of gardening gloves out of the trunk. Dwayne took Aldous out of Hucksley's hands.

Rose asked, "Hucksley, do you know how to take a video on your phone?"

"Ma'am?"

Rose pulled her phone out of her purse and handed it to Hucksley, "It's like taking a picture, but just hold the camera in place. It'll take a video."

"I know," Hucksley replied.

He grabbed the phone from Rose and set himself up, leaning against the tree. Dwayne took out a pocket knife and cut through the bag of ashes inside the black box. He yelped as a layer of ash flew out of the box.

“Hush, Dwayne, it’ll be alright,” Rose insisted. Dwayne kept blinking to try and get the ash out of his eyes.

Valorie asked, “Which way is the wind blowing?” The group looked around. After years of outdoor experience between the five of them, nobody wanted to confidently say which way the wind was going. If they were wrong, it would be an unforgivable mistake.

“Have y’all ever seen *The Lebow-ski*?” Valorie incorrectly questioned. Hucksley understood what she meant. The movie had a scene where Steve Buscemi’s ashes were thrown into the wind and immediately returned back onto the faces of his two best friends. Hucksley was glad to be over by the tree taking a video.

J.W. pointed to the tree, “Leaves are going north, so y’all stand on the other side of Emmeline’s grave.” Dwayne walked over and set the black box on the ground next to the headstone of Aldous’s mother.

Valorie asked, “Wait, are we spreading the ashes over a grave? Is that allowed?”

“That’s what Aldous, Jr., requested in his letter. If you have a better idea, say it,” Rose snapped back.

“I suppose this works,” Valorie yielded. Valorie and Rose put on the gardening gloves and stood south of Emmeline’s grave.

“Hucksley, I don’t think we need to film this whole thing. When I give you the signal, stop filming,” Rose told him. Before Hucksley could respond, Rose shoved her gloved hand into the bag and took out a fistful of ashes. He started recording right as she scattered Aldous close to the ground. Then Valorie took her turn and threw the ashes a little too high. They flew through the wind and landed on Dwayne’s black Air Force 1 sneakers.

She mouthed, “Sorry.”

About halfway through the bag, Rose turned to Hucksley and said, “Alright, that’s enough.” Rose lifted the box and poured the remaining ashes on the Beaumont plot.

Valorie looked over at Hucksley, “Have you been wearing swim trunks this whole time?” Hucksley nodded his head.

Walking away, Dwayne rubbed his eyes with his fist and said, “I think I still got some Aldous in my eye.” Next to Emmeline’s grave and the fresh pile of Aldous, Sr., was a noticeably blank gap of land where a plot should be.

Hucksley asked Rose, “Why is that there?”

“That’s where they’re going to bury Emmeline’s sister when she dies,” Rose explained. It had never occurred to Hucksley that you had to buy a plot of land before you die. He was curious if his grandparents had purchased their plots already but thought better of it.

