

Joan Wickersham

from *The Suicide Index: Putting My Father's Death in Order*

Suicide: psychological impact of

“‘Psychologically impacted’ means the effect of certain circumstances surrounding real estate... 1) The fact that an occupant of real property is, or was at any time suspected to be, infected with the human immunodeficiency syndrome..., or (2) the fact that the property was at any time suspected to have been the site of a homicide, other felony or a suicide.”

From a Connecticut statute enacted in 1990, and repealed in 2004

1. He Haunts the House

“It really doesn’t bother me,” my mother said, of the room where my father had shot himself. “I go in there all the time, to fold the laundry, or to get something out of the filing cabinet. It’s just another room in my house.”

Then she lowered her voice: “But once in a while the cleaning people shut the door of that room when they’ve finished, and that does bother me. Walking up the stairs, and seeing that closed door.”

2. He Makes a Museum

The bulging black trash bag, from when my husband had sorted through my father’s papers the week after he died, still sat on the floor of the study. Every time we visited for the weekend, we noticed that the bag was still there. We asked my mother if we could throw it out. She flapped her hand at us, irritated. “Leave me alone. I’ll deal with it.”

She had bought a little paper shredder, which sat in its box on the floor next to the trash bag.

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“Mom,” I said. “You don’t have to shred his papers. There’s nothing all that personal. Nobody cares.”

“People go through those bags at the dump,” she said. “I don’t want anybody finding things. It’s nobody’s business.”

“Then how about if I take the bag to Kinkos,” I said. “They have giant shredders. They could do the whole bag in about five minutes.”

“Someone working there might open the bag, and get interested in what’s inside.”

“I’ll stand there. I’ll stand and watch while they do the shredding.”

My mother gave me a look of combined annoyance and exhaustion. “I don’t want the shreds in Kinkos garbage,” she said.

I asked my husband if he remembered what he’d put into the bag. “Cancelled checks from twenty years ago,” he said. “File folders full of newsletters your father subscribed to, about successful investing.”

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The book my father had been reading was still in the room, on top of the filing cabinet. It was a fat history of oil and the oil business. I’d given him the book for Christmas, six weeks before he died. He’d filled up some of the silences in our last few phone calls by telling me how much he was enjoying it.

The film he’d shot at Christmas was still in the camera.

The last batch of spaghetti sauce he’d made was in the freezer, in neatly stacked square plastic containers.

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The last CDs he'd listened to were piled up on top of one of the living room stereo speakers.

The wood he'd carried into the house a couple of weeks before he died was still stacked next to the fireplace. The thick suede work gloves he'd worn lay nearby on the hearth, palms and fingers still curved in the shapes of his hands.

All this stuff stayed there, petrified. An eerie accidental museum of him.

3. He Haunts the Boat

The man who bought his little sailboat, who of course had no idea how my father had died, asked my mother if it was OK if he kept the boat's name. He said he could feel my father's presence on the boat, a benign spirit wishing him well. He said, "Your husband was happy sailing. And he was a nice person. I can tell."

My mother said that of course he could keep the name, and she gave him my father's insulated picnic cooler.