

GEORGE SHANNON

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UNLIVED AFFECTIONS

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1



After nine hours of roofing in the Kansas sun, Willie stood numb as the shower's wet heat beat down on his back. He was glad that he had the next day off even if there wouldn't be time to rest. As the cramps in his shoulders began to fade, he stretched and decided he'd swim later on, once the pool was closed. He'd been swimming almost every night since Grom had died and left him to live in the house alone.

"Four more weeks," he told himself as he bent his head down to catch the shower's full force. "Four more weeks and I'd have left her."

It had made no difference to Willie where he went to college. He'd finally picked Nebraska. He was leaving, not going to something else. He just meant to leave his grandmother, Ottawa and every-

thing else like his parents had left him. But Grom had stolen his chance to leave her, by dying.

She'd died the third of August, just before his eighteenth birthday, and left everything to him. After her second heart attack, the middle of June, confined her to bed, she tripled his college savings account without telling him. It was her second heart attack that changed everything. After that she even let her gray hair grow in and didn't care who saw it. But since her funeral Willie was discovering her gray hair was the smallest of the truths she'd long kept hidden.

Willie opened his eyes and watched the water stream down his sun-browned chest and long pale legs. Yes. He'd definitely swim later tonight. First he had to get Grom's things ready for the auction tomorrow.

"Her junk," he whispered, trying to make it sound as insignificant as possible. He didn't want anything that wasn't in his own room. The house was already sold. Everything else could be gone by supper tomorrow, and he'd be free.

He sighed as he thought of Grom's belongings scattered in the yard for everyone to see. Now they'd all know he'd lived in a museum. Thanks to her wrapping everything in covers of plastic or twill, her furniture looked new, but was so out-of-date it belonged like period pieces in a second-hand store. Willie couldn't remember anything really new ex-

cept the bedside phone and remote-controlled television he gave her when the doctor ordered her to stay in bed. She insisted on keeping the house as ordered as her nurse's office at school—everything with one, and only one, place. If something wore out, she replaced it with a duplicate. At a quick glance, a photograph of Grom anywhere in the house—except Willie's room—looked the same no matter what year it was taken.

Turning again to take the water's full beating on the base of his neck, Willie thought ahead to tonight's swim. For years he'd gone alone late at night when his friends thought he was home with Grom and Grom thought he was out with friends. For every date he'd really had, he'd lied about five and gone swimming instead.

Being on the school swim team had made it easy to copy a set of keys to the pool at school. Summers it was even easier with the city park pool. He only had to wait till it closed at ten, then climb the fence, and the pool was his private world again. He loved the full spent feeling that followed as much as he did the swimming itself; everything erased but his body and the rhythm of breathing and strokes. It was the one place he felt in charge and alive.

Willie turned his face into the center of the shower's spray and felt himself swimming lap after lap. Lap after lap away from—

"Damn it!" he yelled, grabbing at the faucets to

stop the icy water that had slapped him back to the foggy bathroom. "Why didn't you yell at me to turn it off like you always do?"

"... Did." he whispered.

Stepping out of the shower, he realized he'd left the last clean towel by his bed that morning. No trouble. He gave his head and arms a shake, then headed down the hall, pleased with his build and nakedness. Years of swimming and two summers working roofs had given his body a solid shape and easy gait. Willie grinned as he stepped in front of the window fan to dry. Grom would have had a fit even thinking that he'd do such a thing.

From the time he'd finished grade school and grown taller than Grom, she'd fussed to keep him covered up. He was proud of being one of the first his age to shave, but was only able to show it off once by letting his beard grow out. That time brought a long lecture from Grom on how she'd raised him to be a decent boy and not some bum. Willie remembered it clearly. It was one of the few times she'd looked directly into his eyes. And all the time she'd talked, her eyes had kept shrinking till they were sharp as snake-eye dice. She'd barely spoken to him for a week after that.

Feeling as dry as he could get on a humid August night, he pulled on a pair of old gym shorts and headed downstairs to eat whatever hadn't gone bad.

The cold pizza passed. Willie dropped into his TV chair, identical to Grom's, and quickly ate both pieces.

"Come on," he told himself. "Just dump the stuff in boxes and get it gone." But he didn't move.

From the week of Grom's first heart attack, in May, to this sticky night, the summer's heat had made everything feel like twice its weight and kept him coated with a film of sweat.

Willie gulped down some Coke and stared at the cracks in the walls that ran like veins beneath old paper skin. With the furniture moved around for the sale, the house had changed completely. Walls showed layers of dirt despite Grom's constant cleaning, and there was a pale square shadow everywhere there'd been a picture. With its order destroyed, the house looked as frail as Grom had just before she'd died.

Once he got everything in the yard, ready for auction, he told himself, it wouldn't be Grom's house anymore. Her house was *full*. She'd kept every closet crowded, and the extra bedroom upstairs was never used for anything but boxes of her past. Old clothes sorted by color. Cards ~~by~~ season. Even all her magazines were boxed in monthly order back to October of 1967.

She'd kept their life as ordered as her past. Cleaning, weeding, washing and baking—each had its assigned day. Up at six thirty no matter what. Sup-

per at five. Dishes at six. To bedrooms by ten. Wednesday had been her bridge club night, the only night she didn't watch TV, crochet and smoke.

Upstairs in bed Willie usually heard only bits of her TV shows, but on Wednesdays he'd hear Grom's other voice. Wednesday nights she laughed. Really laughed. It was the one night he stayed home no matter what.

The six other nights Grom crocheted. She couldn't watch TV without smoking, or smoke without her hands twitching hooks and thread into endless flowers. She'd kept her cigarettes in a crocheted holder, along with her hooks and thread, in an old cigar box that never left the side of her TV chair. Willie couldn't think of one of the objects without all the others, too. No one Grom had liked ever wanted for a bedspread, chair arm covers or a coaster set until this summer. One night in early June she'd suddenly put down her hooks and said, "Turn that thing off. My hands are too tired." That night Willie had swum laps until the sun began to rise.

"Come on," he said to himself, leaning back in the chair. "As soon as all this stuff is gone, *I'm* gone." Then he grabbed the doilies from the arms of his chair, tossed them at a box and headed upstairs.

Just inside his room Willie stopped and carefully pulled a poster off the ceiling. The room was so squat he didn't have to stretch. It was his oldest

poster, turned yellow with age, a picture of a large submarine. Posters were the only way Grom had allowed him to alter his room. The most recent two were of several women in wet swimsuits. Knowing Grom would have hated them made them twice as sexy. Still, he hadn't dared to get them till her second attack in June, when she was told to stay in bed.

No matter what the picture, posters had always been a welcome escape from the wallpaper trains beneath them. As a child he'd picked the trains, pretending they could take him anywhere he wanted to go. But instead they'd taken him back again and again to the day he'd picked them out. It was the day he'd overheard Grom talking to his new second-grade teacher.

"It's the saddest story you'll ever hear," Grom was telling her when Willie came in early from lunch recess. "His father ran off and died before he was born; then my daughter and the fool she was dating were killed when a truck crashed into their car. I'm all he's got in the world."

When Grom and his teacher turned and saw Willie behind them, none of them was able to speak.

That afternoon Grom took him to pick out the wallpaper. All the way to the store and back, she talked about how a big boy like him should be picking out his own. That only hurt him more. He knew he was getting wallpaper because he'd heard

the truth. That he'd found out her lie. She'd always told him that his mother had died from a bad heart the same as his grandpa had when his mother was a little girl.

For years he had rocked in his chair at night with his eyes shut tight trying his best to forget the trains as they circled his room in a closing coil.

Time and the posters had distanced those days and nightmares, but as Willie continued pulling his posters down, the trains showed again, bringing that day back to life. For a moment he thought of gouging out chunks of the wallpaper trains, then instead began to slowly tear up the posters, beginning with the one of the submarine. To see the trains again made him angry at not having been told the truth *and* angry at having to know it.

Willie stuffed the torn posters in the trash. He'd already decided to leave everything behind except his records, stereo, two boxes of clothes and his old rocking chair. If forced to choose, he'd have left his stereo before he'd have left the chair. When Grom had tried to throw it out once when he was small, he'd screamed, "Don't touch it! It's mine. Mine to keep."

The chair was the one thing he had that he was certain he and his mother had shared. He remembered being rocked by his mother, but his proof was a photograph showing his mother and him sitting in it. His own plump face was laughing directly

into the camera at Grom, who'd taken the picture. His mother's face was a smooth echo of Grom's, and all her attention glowed on him. He'd never seen anyone else with such long cascades of curly hair. Willie looked at the picture so often it was wrinkled and smudged. It was always a comfort; always there waiting for him.

It was almost all he knew of his mother as a mother. Grom was full of stories about her daughter, but only as a little girl.

"But I mean what was she like when she was my *mom*?" he'd ask at the end of one of Grom's stories. But the only answer he got would be another story of Grom's dear little girl. To hear Grom, his mother had been perfect at everything in school. And "She always had the prettiest hair. I brushed it two hundred times every night."

Questions about his father brought trouble. Especially asking what he looked like. Grom acted as if he were begging for fancy toys.

"Gettin' only makes you want," she'd scold. "You're better off without."

Afraid of her anger, he usually let it pass, but once in the fourth grade he'd been determined to get an answer.

"But I just want to know if he looked like *me*."

"No."

"What did he do?"

"No."

"What was he like?"

"No."

"Why did he run away? Didn't he want me?"

"No," Grom had snapped. "No. You're better off without him. He's unfit to be a father and he's better off dead."

Though the questions remained as strong as ever in his thoughts, Willie never asked Grom after that. It wasn't so much her sharp words that made him stop, or the lack of answers, but the silence that followed. For hours afterward Grom would ignore him, making him feel erased. Then she'd call him to supper and act like nothing had happened.

Silence had been the hardest and surest thing about living with Grom. Willie always looked forward to the calming quiet he felt when he swam alone. But Grom's silence was like the heavy, nervous quiet of listening for the gun at the start of a race. And when he wasn't waiting for the silence to end, he was waiting for its painful return.

Willie looked around his bedroom. "Done."

Everything was packed or in the trash except the dresser and bed, and they'd be sold at the auction. He'd be gone and in his dorm in Nebraska within the week.

Carefully, he carried the rocker downstairs, going slowly so he wouldn't nick the wood. His mother's or not, he would have liked it. It was the only piece

of furniture in the house that didn't have a thousand look-alikes.

He set it down in the living room by his packed-up stereo and turned on the TV. Then, without even watching to see what was on, he went into Grom's bedroom, turned on her set, and went outside to water the flowers.

Grom's flowers had been off limits, which had been fine with Willie. But this summer, confined to bed, she'd had to let him care for them. He'd missed her working in the garden as much as she had. In the yard she grew softer, humming as she worked to keep each flower bed a patch of pure color, free of weeds. From Willie's window upstairs the yard looked like a giant paint box.

As soon as the sky began to dim, she'd nag Willie to water the flowers and pick the dead blooms. He grumbled as much as she nagged, but the nightly ritual gave them their most comfortable times together. Flowers and seeds could be discussed with ready answers, unlike her heart and Willie's leaving for college. Neither could bear to talk those truths.

As long as she heard the water running Grom would quietly rest, but once it was off she began calling through her window again.

"Are the poppies still blooming?"

"Handfuls." he answered, though the last had bloomed in June.