

LVW Flash Fiction Contest 2017

SECOND PLACE

The Cup Isn't Haunted

by Greg Beatty

"You didn't!"

"We did!"

Pride and judgment warred in their father's face for a moment. Pride won out. "Well, you can *never* tell your mother you went into the Old Henderson House. I mean, that place has sat empty since I was a kid. Who knows what's inside?"

His younger son David exclaimed, "We do! We know, because we went inside!"

David's brother Ellis added, "Top to bottom! Even though the steps—"

Ellis stopped talking abruptly when David made a throat-cutting gesture.

"What about the steps?" their father asked.

"Never mind the steps," Ellis said. "Doesn't matter, because we found ... these!"

Ellis made a game-show host gesture of overly dramatic presentation, and David shrugged the burlap bags from off his shoulder onto the dining room table.

"Yeah, we'll make sure we clean that before your mom is ready to serve dinner."

"What?" David asked.

His father waved the question away. "Never mind. So, what's in the bag?"

"Bag-z," Ellis said, rocking back and forth in excitement. "Bags, three, there are three of them."

"Okay, bag-z," their dad said. "Let's see."

Both boys grabbed at the bags, then David prodded Ellis to go first. The younger Thompson brother peeled back the bag's rough fabric to reveal a classic antique clock. The frame was all cherry, with some lighter wood inlay behind the hands of the clock. Ellis stroked the wood, and his father's hand shadowed his a moment later.

"That's so smooth," Ellis said.

"It is. It really is. And that's amazing. How could something this fine be left in that old house for this long? I mean, sure, the stories about Old Man Henderson probably kept some people away, but —hey!"

Ellis had pulled a long key from his pocket and while his father talked, wound the treasure clock. It immediately began to tick, steady and reassuring.

"Does it chime?"

In answer, Ellis flicked the longer hand of the clock up to 12. A resonant, oversized bonging filled the room.

"Niiiiice!"

"Wait, look at mine," David said. He unwrapped his bag more slowly, turning it into a dramatic reveal that echoed his brother's gesture. The burlap slid free of clear and ancient glass.

"How did he do it, Dad?"

"I have to admit, Davey," their dad said, turning the bottle carefully. "I don't really know. I've never seen a ship in a bottle that had this level of detail and precision. I swear you can ..."

He lifted it to his eyes and squinted. "I swear you can see the fleas on the captain's monkey."

"You can!" David exclaimed. "And the parrot is missing part of one feather."

"Niiiiice!" their father exclaimed again. "We are going to have to find places for both of these. Good places. Places of pride."

All three pairs of eyes turned toward the last bag, though not with the same expression. Where their father's eyes were eager, even hungry, his boys' were solemn and scared.

Their father clapped his hands together. "Well?" he said. "Who's going to open this last bag?"

The boys looked at one another. Ellis eventually broke the deadlock. "Here's the thing, Dad."

Then he ground to a halt again. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the ticking clock.

"Here's the thing," he said again. "We were thinking we might just take that last bag back."

"Really? Why?"

Ellis opened his mouth, then closed it. Then he opened it again.

After a moment, David took over. "It looked special, Dad, and we wanted it most of all. More than the ship. But when we got close to it, it felt ... wrong."

"Haunted," Ellis added.

"Haunted," their father said. "How could you tell?"

This time it was Dave who started speaking and Ellis who stepped in for him. "Neither one of us wanted to touch it. I mean, I put my hand in a pile of rat droppings instead of touching the lid."

"Mouse droppings," Dave said.

"I ... think I need to see this for myself."

Dave and Ellis looked at each other. Then, without speaking, each of them took an edge of the remaining bag. They tugged, folded, and shifted, incrementally pulling until the bag birthed ...

"We don't even really know what it is," Dave said.

"It's called a loving cup," his dad said. "A classic one. It looks like it's actually parts of two different cups: a silver base and a porcelain lid. They almost fit."

When he was younger, Jonathan Thompson had believed the stories about Henderson House. They'd kept him away. They'd kept him safe. He hadn't known how to articulate it then, but there was also something about the house itself, something he'd felt in the hairs of his arms.

Now that he was Dad instead of Jonathan, he felt compelled to model the adult behavior he thought was right, rather than what he felt was viscerally true. In this moment, that meant he ignored the throbbing certainty that his sons were right and the loving cup was haunted. He reached forward to pick it up for a closer look.

One hand touched the silver cup while the other grazed the mismatched porcelain top. The instant his fingers touched his sons' chilly treasure, the contact closed a circuit. However, instead of electricity, what flowed up his limbs to jolt his heart was a pulse of evil, followed a second later by a malign and palpable presence.

"You see," Old Man Henderson said, using Jonathan Garret's mouth like a ventriloquist's dummy. "The cup isn't haunted."

Anymore, he thought, reaching his hands toward the slender necks of Jonathan Thompson's sons. But your father is.

THE END

Greg Beatty lives in Bellingham, WA, with his wife and dog, and walks in the woods as often as he can. His main hobby is martial arts, which means people regularly whack him in the head with sticks. He writes everything from children's books to essays about my cooking debacles.

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