

# THE PAWN SHOP



By Nova Walsh

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An electric buzzer sounded as Arthur Stone pushed the glass door of Al's Pawn Shop open with his hip. He carried a box large enough to block his view, and he craned his neck around to see where he was going. The smell of stale coffee and something moldy hit his nostrils, like it had on his previous visits, and he tried breathing through his mouth. The store was too bright, fluorescent light mixing with the morning sunshine streaming through the front window, bouncing off the glass cases and shiny objects that lined the walls.

"Hey there," he said to the kid behind the counter.

The kid looked up at him for a second and then back down. A pudgy finger pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as the fingers of the other hand turned the pages of a comic book. He had to be at least twenty but the impression that Arthur got was of someone who hadn't even hit puberty. At about the same age, he'd been in the cold trenches of a foreign country, fighting a war. The kid's sandy hair flopped over the rim of the glasses and he only looked up as Arthur placed the heavy box on the counter in front of him.

"Howdy," Arthur said, trying again to make eye contact.

"Hey," the kid mumbled as he pushed the comic aside and pulled Arthur's box toward him. The box gave a loud squeak as it moved across the glass. "You wanna pawn this stuff or what?"

"Yeah, just need to get rid of it all." Arthur looked down at his feet, and then toward the opposite wall.

The kid snapped his gum and began pulling things out of the box and spreading them out on the counter. Arthur watched for a minute as items piled up in front of him – an empty old photo frame that used to hold a picture of him and his wife Virginia on some beach holiday he barely remembered, a black hat with delicate beading around the rim, a lace tablecloth that had been her mother's.

"Is this real gold?" the kid asked him and Arthur glanced at the oval shaped locket and thin strand of gold in his fat fingers. "I'll be back in a sec," he said without waiting for Arthur's reply, turning toward a door that headed into a back room.

Arthur stood at the counter for a minute, absently fingering a pair of silk gloves in front of him, and then turned toward the far wall, crossing his arms in front of him and pacing the length of the shop slowly. His eyes moved from shelf to shelf, but he barely saw the musical instruments, antique jewelry, and baseball cards contained there. His mind wandered aimlessly, in a kind of haze that had become a part of his daily life since the diagnosis. If he had to say, he would probably say that he'd been thinking about that locket, but the thoughts were barely forming as he cut his path over the aging carpet.

The buzzer on the door chimed and Arthur slowly turned to see who'd come in. The fog that had crowded his thoughts instantly cleared as he saw the two men rush in and the gun being pointed at his head.

"Get on the fucking ground," the one pointing the gun said calmly through a silver and black Halloween mask. He had a black hoodie pulled up over his head and moved quickly toward Arthur, making the old man's heart patter so hard he thought for a second he was having a heart attack. Before going down on his knees he saw the other

man, in a tan leather jacket, mean looking work boots, and a ski mask creeping toward the opening to the back of the shop where the kid had gone a just a minute before.

A sharp pain shot up his leg and into his spine as his knees popped and crackled but Arthur didn't hesitate to lay himself on the carpet. If he'd been younger, he might have tried to stop what was happening, but all he could do now was rest his forehead on the back of his hands and wait. It took him a minute to realize that he wasn't even sure if he cared to survive this.

\* \* \*

Arthur had stood outside the dance hall and opened the locket with shaking hands one more time, looking quickly at his picture inside. He frowned, wishing his uniform was a little straighter in the picture, that his hair hadn't looked so lifeless. He was nervous about giving it to Virginia, although he'd planned it for weeks. He was afraid it was too forward after only knowing her a few months, that he was assuming too much. He had decided, though, to take his chances. His ship was leaving in two days for Europe and it was now or never.

The room was hot and crowded, plenty of men trying to make the most of their last few hours of freedom, and it took several minutes before he'd spotted Virginia with a group of women near a far wall. Her light hair was pulled back into a chignon showing off her long neck. He caught her eye and watched her face light up – one of the most beautiful things he would ever see.

“Hey gorgeous,” he said, hoping for a confidence he did not feel.

“Hey yourself.” Virginia’s eyes sparkled.

“You been waiting long?”

“Only all my life.” She grinned and took his moist hand, pulling him onto the dance floor.

Arthur and Virginia danced half the songs, holding each other close, him taking in her smell, trying to lock it into his memory, before he finally worked up the courage to pull her into the foyer away from the noise.

He fumbled in his pocket, taking a few tries to clear his throat and finally looked into her cornflower eyes.

“I know we haven’t known each other a real long time,” he started, but stopped as she gently rested her hand on his arm.

“Well, I don’t want you to forget me while I’m gone.” His face turned red but he pulled the small box out of his pocket.

“I’m not real good with emotions, but I love you Virginia. I want you to know that before I leave. When I come home, if you’ll have me, I want to make you my wife.”

“Oh Arthur,” she said as she grabbed hold tighter to his arm and leaned into him slightly.

“I don’t think it’s fair to ask you to wait for me. Who knows what might happen over there? But I wanted to give you this locket,” he opened the box, showing the shiny oval with his picture, packed into gauze, “so you’ll remember me. Keep me close to your heart.”

“Oh Arthur,” she said again, leaning in close to place her lips against his. “Of course I’ll remember you. And I will wait for you. I love you too.”

\* \* \*

Sixty-five years later, the thought of that kiss could still melt him at his hardest. He sighed into his hands on the pawn shop floor, feeling tears gather in the corners of his eyes. He fought them back but a few drops hit his sun-spotted hands. The old carpet was suddenly overwhelmingly nauseating and he turned his head so the smell wouldn't make him pass out. It seemed to Arthur that he'd been on the ground for hours, but he didn't see any activity from the back, couldn't even hear raised voices. He wondered if the cops might be on their way.

"Don't get any smart ideas old man," the masked man behind him warned, closer to him now, practically kneeling over him. "I will not hesitate to shoot you."

He didn't stay above him for long, but moved around back of the counter and began looking through the cases, raising his head every few seconds to watch Arthur.

Arthur turned his head to the other side so he wouldn't have to look at the man. He didn't care what happened. He certainly had no intention of doing anything. What did it matter anyways?

\* \* \*

The gravity of the situation hadn't sunk in right away. On the way home from the doctor, Arthur remembered, he and Virginia had talked about dinner. His thoughts kept returning to the appointment though. The doctor had been clear about it. Six months,

probably no more, before the cancer would take her. As they'd neared the home they'd fallen into an uneasy silence.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she had finally asked as they pulled onto their street.

"No," he'd said quickly, and then after a pause, "do you?"

She had sighed. Looked away out the window. "Not now."

Arthur was surprised by the ease with which normal life had continued. The days wore on and they still hadn't talked, but the diagnosis hung heavy over their lives, haunting their small world. Arthur busied himself with the small necessities of life; the yard still needed mowing and groceries bought, regardless of the fact that he was losing his wife a little more every day. The television punctuated the pervasive silence.

The hutch with antique plates caught his attention first. It wasn't even a complete thought, just an urgent desire to clear the clutter, be rid of the excess. One day, he waited until Virginia headed out to lunch with her friends and then wrapped up a few of the plates near the back of the hutch carefully, hoping she wouldn't notice their absence. Walking from the dining room to the front hall, he'd managed to fill the rest of the box with odds and ends he was sure his wife wouldn't miss, then stole out the door quickly and into his old pickup.

It took three more weeks of silence, of boxes removed from the house, of hair falling out and late-night sickness, before she confronted him.

"I know what you're doing," she'd said, moving in front of his recliner to block the view of the t.v.

It was the first time he'd really looked into her eyes since he'd begun visiting the pawn shop. "What are you talking about?"

"My things. You've been getting rid of my things."

"What things?" He continued to look at her, noticing the sunken cheeks, how loose her shirt was. He hoped his face wasn't turning red.

"My things have been disappearing. Some scarves and hats, old books. I tried to find my black fur coat the other day, the one I've kept stored in the same place in the garage for the last 20 years. It wasn't there. What have you done with them?"

"Why were you looking for your coat? It's the middle of the summer." He knew how ridiculous he sounded.

Virginia sighed and sat down on the couch beside him. She'd reached for the remote in his hand and turned off the t.v.

"Getting rid of my things isn't going to make it easier."

He got angry then. He stood up from the recliner too quickly, set it to rocking fiercely. "This is my goddamn house and I'll do what I want with what's inside it!" Instantly he regretted the outburst, felt something change between them. Virginia had stared at her hands.

"I'd appreciate it if you left my things alone," she said quietly, still looking into her palms. "I want to enjoy them before I die."

"For God's sake, Virginia. Don't be so melodramatic." He didn't look at her as he said it, but stared into the backyard through the kitchen window. After a minute he turned and left the room.

\* \* \*

She hadn't mentioned her things after that, and they continued to avoid talking about the cancer that ate her up from the inside out. He had continued to pile boxes with old things to take to the pawn shop when she was out or lying in bed, pretending she didn't know, as if the confrontation had never taken place. Arthur's guilt was the only thing that changed, becoming a constant companion in his quest to rid the house of her presence.

\* \* \*

Arthur's ears perked up at the sound of sirens approaching. He watched as the ski-masked man's shoes began pacing quickly in front of his line of vision.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing back there?" he shouted, moving to the window to look out and pointing the gun absentmindedly backwards toward where Arthur lay, no longer concerned with the old man on the floor. At one time Arthur might have taken advantage of this moment, this man's lapse in attention. Now he just shifted his weight onto his other hip. All he wanted now was to get out of this place alive, go back home and tell Virginia how sorry he was.

Arthur heard a commotion in the background, a scuffle or grunting. It was hard to hear anything at all from where he lay on the ground. A minute later the other man ran out, gun in one hand, large bag in another.

"Let's go!" he yelled and the two shot out the door into the bright morning.

Arthur moved slowly to his knees, feeling a pain shoot through his hip, and then steadied himself up onto his feet just as the kid ran into the room from the back of the store.

“Holy shit! You okay mister? That was crazy.”

The kid moved carefully toward the window and looked out. The sirens continued their approach and Arthur could see the kid’s excitement at the danger he’d brushed against, his legs moving back and forth beneath him, fingers drumming on the glass. Arthur moved to the counter and began replacing his wife’s things in the cardboard box.

“I’d like that locket back,” he said, holding the hat to his nose for a second before placing it carefully on top of the rest of the things. He’d hoped it would smell of her, but all he could detect was time, a faint mustiness from it being packed away for decades.

“Those guys stole it,” the kid answered, turning now toward Arthur where he stood at the counter. “Hey, really buddy, are you okay? You need a doctor or something?” he asked, looking at him a little more carefully, as if expecting him to break.

Arthur shut his eyes for a second. Sighed. He gathered the box in his hands and walked quickly toward the door. The loss of the locket was a damn shame, but there was no time to worry about it. He needed to get home.