

Ball Caps and Coffee Mugs

by Tracey Sterns

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We were dazzled by this beautifully written and moving example of elegiac fiction. The bittersweet tone—a difficult mood—is sustained faultlessly throughout the narrative. Characters are sketched with brief strokes through incidental details and asides; there is alchemy in the finely crafted prose and the handling of pathos is masterful. Quote: ‘There was something about a mobile home hitched to a trailer that trumpeted broken dreams.’ Wow!

The trailer was crowded with caps and mugs that marked their lives. What was he going to do with all the mugs? Norm set Ali on the kitchen table, peeled off his cap by the peak and scratched the back of his head from ear to ear along the fringe of hair. The parcel looked like something you might receive in the mail, general delivery. Norm was the sort of person who would ask the price of everything, and he was always in the habit of whistling afterwards. Even in consultation for funeral arrangements, so he was still shopping for a container. What did they call it? An *urn*? A sacred scattering was starting to look like the best option—but where?

He raked through the drawer for the can opener and clamped it on a tin of chili as the old cat jumped up on the table and sniffed at the package with characteristic indifference. Ali would never let her up on the table, and Norm wasn't supposed to eat chili—any beans really—they gave him indigestion, and worse. So he'd pack them on fishing trips. They were more of an outdoor meal anyway and a strain on the ventilation system in their little love nest. Once Lila had

succinctly deduced that the sound of the clattering utensils was not the dinner bell, she leaped down and scratched at the door to get takeout. They could both afford to miss a meal or two.

A construction worker had brought her over in a paper cup nearly ten years ago now. She hadn't even grown into a kitten when they first got her. Norm never really cared for cats, but he liked a good bargain. And the local pet food store gave ten percent off to all black cats and dogs because they felt they had been oppressed, or at the least compromised, throughout the ages as metaphors for bad luck and dark days. Besides, when he told the stranger that he took his coffee black but not that furry, it was one of the best ones he'd ever gotten off. Now, he needed the cat as a constant source to repeat the joke over and over and over. He hadn't told it in a while because no one had come by for some time.

Ali would say that she wanted to be cremated once her time ran out, 'it's the only way I'll get back my hourglass figure.' Norm rattled the box, he'd never quite gotten that one until now. The thought of her trickling through an oversized egg timer for all eternity had never entered his mind—some fortresses were less penetrable than others. Mind you, he had never given it much thought either. A plot was a lot of money, and they'd never owned land. They always rented. Anyway, Norm wanted to move south. And what was the sense in leaving her behind now. He thought Ali did too, but nothing really ever got done unless Ali wanted it. And, she always said, one old friend is better than two new ones. Norm knew a lot of people, but not like that. He was surprised by all the people at the service he didn't recognize.

They'd bought the trailer for their retirement with a plan to move it south some day. Norm would say, 'Why pay for heat when some states were giving it away for free.' Now it was too old to be certified for the road. They'd have to pay to have it moved—towed to a scrap yard.

There was something about a mobile home hitched to a flatbed trailer that trumpeted broken dreams. Like a hearse in a procession of one—a corpse without *a cortege*.

Ali would get a coffee mug whenever something seemed like an occasion, and Norm had never been seen without a ball cap. It's like a fresh start she'd say, and the coffee tasted like a brand new day. You got three and a half paid days now for a death in the immediate family. And Ali was nothing if not immediate. They'd been married nearly forty years. That makes a day for every ten years, or something, Norm thought. He gazed over toward the microwave and realized he forgot to press the start button. He couldn't remember when they'd last used the stove. Even at Christmas, they just bought the big turkey legs now, like the ones at Disney. Ali's Disney mug was right next to her Christmas mug. The Christmas mug was on the shelf opposite Norm's kitchen chair. He was the one obliged to stare at it in July. He could sit in either chair now. You could see out the window on Ali's side. Norm stared unfocused at all the ball caps that scalloped the borders of the walls with a row of coffee cups on the shelves below. The bell sounded, as a knell might toll, Norm took his bowl out of the microwave, set it in front of his wife's chair and sat down.

He always ate without looking up and once he'd finished, he saw the Niagara Falls mug she got on their honeymoon. It was their anniversary last week and he recalled seeing it in the dish rack for the first time in forever. It was so faded he hardly recognized it. He had a Niagara Falls cap he used to wear everywhere. He lost it setting out on a salmon charter with the boys one windy day. He remembered watching it get smaller as it was sinking into the water and it made him feel strangely empty. The operator tried to cast out and hook it, but it was no use and just a gesture really. He raised his eyes in an attempt to fix a memory and there was the very cap above the cup. Ali must have bought another one somewhere. Beside it was that Christmas cap

with the antlers tucked back that he'd only worn once, and below another matching mug. Over to Ali's right was the tall CN Tower mug with Norm's CN Tower cap, the Marineland cup and cap were in line over by the door: A Thousand Islands, Old Fort York, the Blue Mountains, Parliament Hill, each corresponding to the other. They'd been all over Ontario, even parts of Quebec.

Ali would just stare off into space and disappear to somewhere else and Norm would never know she was gone. Now she was gone for good. They had both been together long enough to wonder what it would be like to be without the other, never realizing that only one of them would get that chance. Neither Norm nor Ali ever thought for a moment it would be him. He was five years older to start. Didn't exercise, didn't eat right, he was practically oblivious to his surroundings—maybe that was the key. Innocent inattentiveness, restive mindlessness, applied disregard. Fishing was about as much exercise as sleeping was an activity. Norm took scheduled naps, which was almost to say that he made plans to do nothing—not only nothing but to fall into a state of being unaware of doing nothing, on purpose. Ali could only sleep a couple of hours a night.

She had died suddenly. But she'd always been spontaneous, did everything on impulse. Norm still thought that that was the only reason she married him—to go to Niagara Falls. They'd gone to the justice of the peace, packed a few things and rode his *Triumph* all the way, nonstop, to the motel right along the river for the long weekend. In those days everyone drove a motorcycle—it was your first car. He had to have it refitted for the passenger seat—luckily he found a good used one at the wreckers.

It was odd, the undertaker gave him her rings and teeth in a little velvet drawstring bag when he wrote the cheque as if they'd been collateral. He unzipped his windbreaker pocket, took

the pouch out and set it on the table—he thought of his uncle with the glass eye. The rings he could understand, but what was he going to do with the teeth—the denturist had done a nice job. He separated the little aperture opening and looked inside. Norm recalled the flicker of Ali’s tentative smile when he first presented her with that engagement ring—and there they were both in that little bag, along with her wedding band. What was he to do with her now?

It was pouring rain and Norm ducked into the first shop off the lock. As bad luck would have it, it happened to be what he could only assume was an overpriced antique store. Once inside, Norm halted in his steps when the proprietor fixed her sights on him. He stiffened not daring to take another step. His eyes darted around the room and alighted on a fancy brass pot on a separate shelf, all on its own, exclusive. The woman knew where he was looking as the water dripped from the peak of his ball cap.

“You have very good taste. That is an antique copper coffee *urn*, circa 1890, in perfect working order—but I imagine you’ll want a rain check.”

Norm was overcome by the word. A drop of water must have rolled off into the corner of his eye. “Is there room for two?”

“It makes eight cups.”

“I’ll take it.” There was no need to whistle, since he hadn’t asked the price.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

My writing is little more than taking the voices inside my head out for exercise. This story is just a welter of introspections that happened to formulate something of a plot.

BIO: I have a number of unpublished works to my credit, prefer to wear men's clothing, have an impressive collection of shoes and hats and divide my time between a chalet in Malibu and a beach house in Aspen. Studied pataphysics as an undergrad but dropped out of three courses short of a load.