

Coming Home

By Ken Sieben

As Holly tries to remember how much farther it is to the jughandle that will switch her back into the northbound lane, she notices the abandoned bait-and-tackle store on that side has become the EZ Cabinet Shop. A weird sense of awareness that she is somehow connected flashes within the deepest regions of her memory, then—poof!—disappears. My mind is playing tricks on me today, she thinks. Maybe it was a mistake to come all the way across the country to this silly wedding.

An hour ago, trying to exit Newark Airport in her Focus rental, she was so confused by the roadway changes that she missed the entrance to the Turnpike. So she finally got to drive on the infamous Route 1, a highway she had managed to avoid during the ten months she lived in New Jersey. This is the ugliest stretch of road I've ever seen, she thought, as she inched through untimed traffic lights past shabby bars, rooms-by-the-hour motels, run-down fast-food stores, truck dealerships, junk yards, and, finally, the long, interminable stretch of oil refineries. She switched her heater's air supply from fresh to re-circulate. The only green she saw for twelve miles was a cemetery, and, in the late February sunlight, the grass was about as green as it ever gets in southeastern California.

Once on the Garden State Parkway, though, every aesthetically-pleasing mile brought her closer to her destination. From the Hilltop B&B where she has taken a room for three nights, she will soon once again behold the perfect view—Sandy Hook, a dune- and holly-covered spit of sand jutting five miles northward between bay and ocean, pointing toward Romer Shoals Lighthouse, and, to the north, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the Manhattan skyline; to the northeast, Coney Island and the Rockaways.

"I'll take this room," Holly says fifteen minutes later to Joyce Morris, the sixty-something owner of the B&B. "I just love the view, especially on such a clear day. You can see all the way to Fire Island from here." Holly also loves the high mission-oak bed facing the picture window, the beige down quilt, the eggshell-white walls, and the paintings of a clipper ship and a steamboat hanging over the oak dresser and desk. "When I lived in town, I used to walk up the hill every clear day to take it in."

"And when was that?" Joyce asks, in a confident tone suggesting she is never surprised when a former resident of the area chooses to return.

"From August of '90 to June of '91. I taught English at the high school."

"That would have been too late for my son. Jim graduated in '88." Always the perfect hostess, Joyce

says, "Let's drop your bags here so I can show you the public areas." She leads Holly back down the graceful three-storey oak staircase through the front-to-back hall and into the parlor, where Holly notes the enormity of the room. A fireplace with a grouping of three love seats in the center of the end wall and a piano opposite separates the room into a library/reading space in front and a sitting space in the rear, overlooking the same magnificent view as her room has. From there, they walk across the hall into an enormous kitchen in the rear and a dining room in front, the two areas separated only by a free-standing counter-high custom clear oak server with doors facing both sides and wine racks on both ends.

"This is all so lovely," Holly declares, then adds, "a perfect combination of old and new. I love the antique furniture and the modern server and cabinets."

"A few of the pieces have been in our families for generations. The rest we bought locally. We had the cabinets made up by a local shop. You probably passed it on the way in."

Holly feels her heart start to flutter but manages to ask, "EZ Cabinet Shop?"

"Yes. We were one of the owner's first customers. We think he did an outstanding job."

"Yes, they look so, so, professional. But they certainly don't look easy."

"Oh, EZ came from the cabinet-maker's initials. I'll think of his name in a sec."

Like a wave breaking over a submerged rock jetty, an almost-buried memory bursts into Holly's consciousness. "Is it, perhaps, Ernie Zunker?" she asks.

"Yes, that's it. But how could you have possibly known?"

"He was one of my students the year I taught at Waterwitch High. It was my first job out of college, but things didn't work out. The principal disapproved of how I handled what he and everybody else called the senior dumb-dumbs. But they weren't dumb, just ignored. Ernie was the brightest of the group. I tried to get them to think for themselves by keeping daily journals of their activities and observations."

"Was that a bad thing? I wish I had had English teachers who made me think for myself."

"Apparently, it didn't fit within the curriculum guide. But at twenty-one I thought I knew more than the administrators and the experienced teachers, and Ernie showed a lot of promise. He had a part-time job in a cabinet shop and was quite proud of his abilities." Holly stops, not wanting to babble. She remembers as though it happened yesterday that Ernie dropped out of school with three months to go the day after she reluctantly submitted her resignation "for personal reasons" to avoid being fired. She had given in to the system that she'd been encouraging him to fight. "Listen, Joyce," she says, "Everything is lovely. Right now, I'd like to unpack and then go out for dinner. Can you recommend a good seafood

place that isn't too pricey?"

"The best seafood restaurant in the county is The Admiral Benbow, right down the hill overlooking the harbor, but it's expensive. Of course, I might be a little prejudiced because I owned it for most of my life."

"My goodness, that's a coincidence. You see, I flew in for a friend's wedding on Saturday, and that's where the reception will be."

"Well, then, my next choice would be The Mermaid's Tail two blocks farther, which is a lot cheaper and probably the second best, though you'll have to bring your own wine. But you're welcome to eat dinner here with me. My husband stayed an extra week in Florida to re-finish his mother's floors, and I have no other guests. Do you like salmon?"

"I love it, but you can't get decent salmon where I live now. Are you sure I wouldn't be imposing?"

"Of course not. I hate eating by myself, and I still love to cook. I don't want to lose my touch. Please, I'd be delighted to have company. No extra charge."

"Well, thanks. I'd prefer company, too. Most nights I eat home by myself, and I'm really not much of a cook." Despite Joyce's warmth, Holly suddenly feels very lonely and unsure of herself.

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On Friday morning, Holly drives the mile back on the highway to the EZ Cabinet Shop, curious to know what Ernie Zunker has made of himself, nervous about seeing him after seventeen years. She, having skipped fifth and tenth grades, had been the school's youngest teacher, while he, kept back twice, had been its oldest student, only eleven months her junior,. In May, he would catch up to her for a month until she turned thirty-eight in June. He had been tall and handsome, despite his scruffy appearance and filthy work clothes. She imagines him now, dressed and groomed better to attract customers. He had actually looked quite threatening as a high school senior.

Holly parks in front of the shop and opens the door to what is apparently the office, furnished with a small computer desk, file cabinet, hinged rack of door samples, and chest-high drawing table covered with rolls of blueprints. Photographs of finished cabinet installations cover the walls. She hears the whirring of a power saw on the other side of a door change pitch and start to wind down, in response, she hopes, to the bell that sounded as she passed through the front door.

"Hello, Ernie," she says to the man who enters the office from the shop. It is the same Ernie Zunker,

a bit thicker in the upper body, thinner in the waist, though his black wavy hair is shorter and starting to gray on the sides. He wears worn blue jeans, a plaid shirt, tan work boots, a carpenter's tool belt, but no wedding band, and he looks puzzled.

After a minute, Ernie asks, "Miss Kaiser? Ms. Kaiser."

"That's right, Ernie, but after all these years, you should call me Holly."

He looks at her, studies her narrow face, her miniature body, extends his right hand for hers. "Holly. Short for Holeluke. Your mother's a native Hawaiian, and your father's a Marine Sergeant-Major."

"That's right. You have an excellent memory. They're both still well, though my father retired from the Marine Corps sixteen years ago. He's going to retire again next year, this time from a private military academy in Arizona. Then they'll both move to Hawaii." Holly finds herself very happy to be in Ernie's presence. "Are you surprised to see me?"

"Yes, of course, Ms. Kaiser, uh, Holly. I mean, I never expected to see you again."

"Well, I'm in town for a wedding tomorrow. Do you remember Ms. Atkins from high school?"

"Yeah, I had her for typing freshman year. Ernie looks down. His face turns red as he smiles and says, "But I was too lazy to practice and got a D. Now I wish I could type better. There's more paperwork in this job than I realized. Is she finally gonna marry Mr. Kohlberger?"

"Yes—after all these years, and he's Dr. Kohlberger now." Holly thinks about Sue Atkins and Barnett Kohlberger and wonders if they love each other or just, at this stage of their lives—Sue's forty-five and Barnett must be in his fifties—have decided that marriage is convenient. Sue had been Holly's closest friend during her year at Waterwitch High, and they'd stayed in touch with Christmas cards, an occasional phone call, and email ever since. Sue started chasing Barnett, then the assistant principal, when he was divorced by his first wife in 1990.

When Barnett was appointed principal after Dr. Chompsky's retirement in 2002, he insisted on avoiding any opportunity for his political enemies to charge him with nepotism, so he insisted that Sue resign if they were to continue a relationship. Terrified that she'd never marry—perhaps still in love, Sue agreed. Barnett waited until her tenure was secure after the first day of her fourth year at Riverton Middle School before formally proposing marriage. He'd also waited until his ex-wife married a tenured professor at Rutgers and could thereby get free tuition for their two children—and to buy a condo when he no longer had to pay child support.

"Anyway," Holly continues, "I'm staying at the Hilltop B&B, and, when I expressed admiration for the

cabinetry, Joyce, the owner, told me you had done the job. I decided I couldn't go back to California without saying hello."

Ernie smiles, and Holly knows instantly that her visit was a good idea. He says, "I heard that you got another teaching job in California."

Holly frowns, glad to see this young man who had so challenged and inspired her, but a little ashamed to discuss her failed career and the compromises she's made with herself. She decides not to explain, but rather to find out more about Ernie. "I felt I should be closer to my parents after my father retired. So, Ernie," she adds, sweeping her arm around the office and nodding in the direction of the shop, "you must be doing quite well for yourself."

"Well, it's a tough business. When I opened up six years ago, all the established cabinet-makers were working for the big construction firms with more new housing contracts than they could handle. I had no trouble drumming up renovations. It seemed like everybody who wasn't buying a MacMansion was putting on an addition or, at least, having a new kitchen built. But now with the housing slowdown, well, it's really getting tough to turn a profit."

"I guess running any kind of small business is tough, but you were always a smart guy, Ernie."

Ernie's confidence seems to be growing with each word, and Holly is glad for him. "Joyce and Will Morris—they were," he says, "my first customers. They knew exactly what they wanted and gave me a free hand to do it as best I could. Fine people. I can't remember how many times they let me show their place to potential customers. Uh, speaking of potential customers, Holly, I don't mean to be rude, but I have three appointments this afternoon, and I've got to finish gluing up and clamping a hutch before I leave for lunch. But I'd love to get together with you and talk. It's really great seeing you again. I've never forgotten all you did for me."

Holly shakes her head. "I'm not sure I did anything for you, Ernie, besides setting an example for you to drop out."

"Holly, you taught me spelling and grammar, but the real lessons went way beyond the classroom. I'd love to have the chance to discuss them with you if you'd care to share a meal with me before you go back."

Holly feels her spirits rise as if caught in an updraft at the thought of a quiet meal with her former favorite student. "I'm having lunch today with the bride and her mother, the wedding is tomorrow, and I promised to have lunch with Joyce on Sunday, then I leave in the late afternoon." By the end of her

sentence, Holly once again feels that the world moves too fast for her to ever find her proper place in it.

“What about dinner tonight? There’s lots of great restaurants in town, but if you like bolognese sauce, everybody says mine is the best. I made a huge batch last night because my daughter’s coming this weekend, and it’s her favorite.”

His daughter? Refusing to allow herself the few seconds it might take to figure out what’s wrong with the scenario, Holly blurts out, “That sounds great. You’ll have to give me directions.”

Ernie looks at the ceiling and points upward. I live upstairs. It was built about fifty years ago, so it isn’t very modern, but the stove works. The stairs are on the outside. Is six-thirty okay with you?”

“That would be fine. Can I bring a bottle of wine?”

“I’m usually a beer drinker, but a nice Chianti sounds good for a special occasion like this.”

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“This bolognese sauce is the best I’ve ever tasted,” Holly tells Ernie after swallowing her last mouthful of dinner and wiping her face with a paper napkin. “And this comes after salmon fillet encrusted in almond slices at Joyce’s last night, a huge breakfast this morning, then a broiled seafood combo lunch at The Mermaid’s Tail. Tomorrow I’ll be eating a reception dinner at The Admiral Benbow, then breakfast and lunch with Joyce on Sunday. I think I’ll put on ten pounds this weekend, Ernie.”

Holly had arrived at six-thirty on the dot, wearing her best jeans, a wool plaid shirt, and running shoes—and silk long johns on the assumption that all upper-floor apartments in Waterwitch would be as bone-chillingly frigid and damp as hers had been. When she saw that Ernie was wearing only a thin T-shirt, though, she knew she’d be uncomfortably hot for the evening.

And Ernie’s “upstairs” was a barely finished and sparsely furnished open attic—a space in which to eat, sleep, watch television, and read, but not what Holly would consider a home. Still, it was homier than where she lived, and he seemed proud of it, especially his daughter’s room, which was in the farthest corner. He had framed a dormer into the back of the roof to give her a view of the woods behind the building, and he had insulated the partitions to absorb most of the highway noises that penetrated the rest of the loft. He’d also installed a private bathroom for her, which Holly used to strip off her long johns and stuff them into her purse. “Tell me about your daughter, Ernie,” Holly said after they had finished the tour and she’d sat down at the table to sip a glass of wine while he dropped the linguini into boiling water and grated some imported parmigiano.

“Chelsea will be seventeen in September, same age as her mother when she gave birth. You remember Sally Larsen, the one who got you into trouble for reading a sex manual in class the day you were out sick?”

“Yes, of course.” Holly had frequently been called to the principal’s office to explain her students’ classroom and study-hall activities.

“Well, I was the father. We were never really in love, but was she fun to be with—had a great sense of humor. One night we went a little too far—and then it was too late. That was probably the main reason I dropped out of school to work full-time. I needed the money to support a wife and kid.”

“You married Sally?”

“No. We were both willing, but she was still a minor. Her old man wanted her to have an abortion and hush everything up. He thought I was a worthless bum and wouldn’t let Sally see me anymore. He threatened to have me arrested. Her mother was Catholic—so was Sally—and they wouldn’t hear of an abortion. So I agreed to pay child support and stay out of the way. A few years later, when Sally started getting serious about another guy, she asked me to mind Chelsea for a weekend. I was happy for the chance to be a daddy. When Sally got married, she agreed to let me have Chelsea one weekend every month. It’s a neat arrangement. Sally gets a weekend off with her husband. I love having the kid, and she puts up with me. We always do whatever she wants as long as she keeps her grades up, and Sally and her husband appreciate me. Even her father shakes my hand—and his head—if he happens to be there when I deliver Chelsea.”

During dinner, Ernie explained how he’s had a number of girlfriends over the years, but none that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. “You know, on nights when Chelsea’s here, after she goes to bed, I really feel lonely. That’s when I wish I had a wife to keep me company. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’ve had women spend the night with me, but in the mornings, they don’t seem like the kind I want to have breakfast with or come back upstairs to again. I guess maybe I just ain’t, excuse me, I’m just not the marrying type. You’re not married, either, so I’m sure you understand.”

“I’ve always thought I wanted to be married,” Holly answered after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence during which she couldn’t stop thinking of the compromises Sue and Barnett were making, and whether or not she should be willing to do the same. At lunch, Sue’s mother had seemed as doubtful about her daughter’s chance for happiness as Holly did. As thoughts of the about-to-be-married couple began to recede, though, Holly found herself thinking of Ernie as an eligible man rather than as a former

student before she finished her answer, “but I’ve never met the right man. My mother’s always telling me to drop my standards a little, that there’s no perfect man out there. But then my father will comment, as if he had been worth waiting for, that I should wait for as long as it takes to find the man of my dreams. Lately, though, he’s been dropping more and more hints about how much he’d like to have a grandchild.” Holly paused, then smiled and added, “I think if I ever called home with the news that I was going to be a single mother, my mother would be scandalized and my father would say ‘Great!’”

“I think you and I have had very different relationships with our parents, Holly,” Ernie said in response.

“If I remember from your journal, your father, uh, left when you were a kid.”

“That’s right. Of course, I was too young to understand, and my mom insisted he’d be back soon, but as the years went by and we never heard from him, I guess she gave up. She started dating this guy named Jack when I was about fourteen, and pretty soon she moved in with him. I kind of liked being on my own, so it didn’t bother me. But seven years ago, my mom and I got letters from a lawyer explaining that my old man had died and we were both—each?—beneficiaries of seventy-five thousand dollars life insurance. It came as quite a shock, not his death because we’d assumed he had died years before, but the fact that he’d not forgotten us. Mom and Jack got married and bought a condo in Florida. I used my inheritance to buy this building. I know it’s not much of a place to live, but, now that I’ve got the time, and haven’t run out of money yet, I’m going to fix it up. I’ll start with a modern kitchen ’cause I love to cook. Then, if things are still slow, I want another dormer facing the woods for a combination living-dining room. I’ll build real walls and ceilings and have a custom home which will be a great living advertisement for my business.” Ernie nods his head, as if finished with his declaration, then adds, “But I’d sure like to have a wife to help me plan the details. Otherwise, it might never happen.”

After dinner, Ernie puts the leftovers into the refrigerator and waves Holly away from the dirty dishes, then suggests that they finish their wine on the sofa and talk about Holly. “Are you still teaching in California?” he asks after they sit down. He left the light over the table on, and they face a darkened television set as they resume talking.

“No, Ernie. The truth is, I haven’t been very successful as a teacher. When I left Waterwitch, I found a job at a high school in San Bernadino, about seventy miles from the Barstow Marine Base where my father was serving his final tour of duty. But they cut my position out of the budget after two years, so I never got tenure. Budget cuts were pretty much the rule all over California by then, so the best I could do

was a permanent substitute job. But I was never more than a babysitter. I had to fight with the kids constantly to maintain discipline, and I got the feeling that nobody really cared what happened in the schools. One day I escorted a class on a field trip to the Silverado Ghost Town near Barstow, and was offered a job there as a tour guide, I guess because I'd been able to keep my group from getting into trouble. The money was better than I'd been getting as a sub, so I took it."

"But you weren't happy, were you?" Ernie is looking at Holly in a way that he never had while her student. She feels he cares about her as a person and wishes she could enjoy the satisfaction he believes she deserves.

"It wasn't bad. The silver-mining era was new to me, and I could use my teaching skills to convey the history I was learning. And, with no homework to correct, the job also left me enough free time to go back for my master's degree in English-as-a-Second-Language. I managed to get an adjunct position at Barstow Community College, and pretty soon I was a full-time adjunct—which meant no benefits and less than half the salary of a regular position. When the Ghost Town offered me a promotion to Special Events Coordinator if I would come back, I decided that a teaching career just wasn't in the cards for me. I accepted it, and that's what I've been doing for ten years now. I still teach one adjunct course every semester."

"But that's not the career you had in mind, is it?"

"No, it's not. Frankly, I'm bored and unsatisfied. I'm also a little jealous of my father. He went to college on the GI Bill, became a geography teacher, then did an on-line master's in curriculum and administration at Penn State. He's been the Academic Dean at the Marine Academy—an exclusive military prep school that hires mostly retired marines—in Arizona for eight years. He's always trying to get me to take a job there teaching ESL, and it might be great—a salary based on all my teaching experience, along with full benefits, and ambitious, self-disciplined kids to teach, kids who jump to attention when a teacher enters a classroom."

"Is that what you really want to do with the rest of your life, Holly?"

"Oh, Ernie, I wish I knew for sure."

Ernie says nothing, though Holly can tell there's something he wants to say. Instead, he excuses himself to use the bathroom. When he comes back, he brings a chair from the kitchen and places it in front of the television so they can look at each other as they continue speaking. "Holly," he begins, "the best advice you gave me—all of us—as a teacher was to try to figure out why things happened the way

they did. I have the feeling you stopped following your own advice. You never told me I looked like a scary bum, but writing down the things that happened made me aware that I did. I remember writing one day in my journal that the foreman finally gave me a chance by putting me in charge of an installation. Well, he gave me the chance because I asked for it and promised to watch my language, shave, cut my hair, dress neater, and smile, and I made those promises because I had figured out why people didn't want to be around me. In other words, your faith in me made me take a good look at myself. I saw my faults and fixed them. Then, Joey Garcia showed faith in me, and it worked again."

"I'm very glad for you, Ernie," Holly whispers.

"And I'm very grateful to you, Holly. You and my Algebra teacher were the only teachers who ever showed me respect. Because of that, I began to show Sally some respect instead of just taking advantage of her. I assumed responsibility when she told me she was pregnant. Now I have a well-adjusted teenage daughter who respects me, her mother, and her stepfather. And I have my own business plus a standing offer from Joey G to come back to work for him if I can't make it on my own. By the way, I finished my GED a year after dropping out, and I've taken a few design courses at the county college. I'm a lucky man, Holly, and I owe it to you. You were a great teacher, and I think it's a shame that you're still not teaching other kids like me and Sally—sorry, like Sally and I—me!"

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While the flight attendants are distributing drinks and snacks after the 727 has reached cruising altitude, Holly decides not to watch the movie, but rather to take out her laptop and compose a letter to her parents explaining her new plans. She won't email them from the plane because she'd rather sleep on her words at least overnight. She wants them to be clear and unambiguous; she does not want to leave any openings for them, her father, especially—a good, loving, supportive man who knows he's right even when he might not be one hundred percent right. No, her letter must state her intentions and her reasons absolutely.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm writing this aboard the plane that just left Newark at 5:10 p.m. and will land in Ontario, CA, at 10:32 p.m. with a layover in Denver. My car is at Ontario, so I should be home by 11:15. Of course, I'll email you as soon as my plane lands so you can stop worrying, but what follows will arrive tomorrow

morning. Please read it carefully.

This trip has given me time off to take stock of my life and make some important decisions. First of all, I have decided not to apply for a teaching position at the Marine Academy. Reason: I never want anyone to speculate that I was offered the position only because my father was Academic Dean. Now we know that would not be the case, but it might seem so to others, and I simply cannot tolerate suspicion of my integrity.

I have also decided to return to Waterwitch. I grew up in four different parts of the USA, as well as in Europe and Asia. Of all the places I've lived in, I find the north Jersey shore to be the best. The scenery is breathtaking, the ocean is warm enough to swim in, New York is a forty-minute ferry ride, and I discovered that my best friends live there. Until I find a permanent place, I will sublet my friend Sue's apartment for the remaining three months of her lease because she will move into her new husband's condo when they return from their honeymoon. The arrangement is perfect; I have a decent place to live while I look for a job and a permanent home, and she has the time to move or dispose of her stuff.

As to my career, I'm tired of being a glorified tour guide. The work is interesting but no longer challenging. I know I would have made a competent Marine Corps officer, but we all know that my uncorrected vision didn't meet the standard. I will always regret not having the opportunity to serve my country in that capacity, but I do not blame the Corps for not wanting its officers to be distracted by the loss of a contact lens while leading their troops into battle.

I am, however, an excellent teacher, and I've decided that I gave up too easily because of reasons I thought were beyond my control. I intend to try again to secure a full-time position teaching ESL. The influx of Latinos and Eastern Europeans into New Jersey means there must be jobs available or soon opening up. I will apply to every public high school and college within driving distance. If I have to teach adjunct and/or substitute at several institutions for a semester or two to make ends meet, so be it. I've long had the necessary credentials and experience for a permanent position; I finally have found the determination to keep trying until I achieve what I want. Once I'm in a tenure-track line, I intend to start work on a Ph.D., something I should have done years ago.

I will submit my resignation to Silverado tomorrow morning. I have been living month-to-month in their women's housing and own no furniture and no more clothes and possessions than will fit in my car. I will offer a month's notice but may leave earlier if they appoint a replacement. As planned, I will spend Easter weekend with you, then drive to New Jersey the week after, looking forward to the next phase of

my life as I cross the country again.

Let me close by explaining how a new friend and an old one unknowingly led me to these decisions.

I spent three nights at a B&B in Waterwitch owned by a woman who gave up a highly successful career as a four-star restaurant owner because she decided it had almost cost her her family. On 9/11, as she watched the Twin Towers burn and collapse, she realized her mistake, decided to sell the restaurant, marry her boyfriend, spend time with her mother and stepfather and in-laws in Florida and with her son, daughter-in-law, and grandson in California. Then she and her husband returned to Waterwitch and bought the B&B. They spend three weeks in Florida and three in California every winter enjoying their families. I learned a lesson from Joyce about decision-making.

I must also tell you that I re-met a man about my age whom I admire very much for all that he has accomplished through his own inner drive. It's much too early to know if he's "the man of my dreams," but I very much enjoyed his company and look forward to seeing more of him. I'm certainly not going to throw myself at him, but he has inspired me to try harder to give my life more purpose. If he could create a satisfying life for himself, then I can do it, too.

Love,
Holly

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