

LARRY MORACE

City by the Sea, 2014
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOHN YEWELL

A Good Son

It was hard to imagine Old George still having a mother. He was in his sixties, although he looked ten years older on account of being homeless for as long as anyone could remember. A Vietnam vet. But there it was, a letter from her. She had to be ninety. It seemed cruel to tell her the truth: that Old George had frozen to death.

Our shelter has rules, mainly about behavior—no drugs or alcohol, that sort of thing. Another is you've got to be inside by sunset. We'd held the door as long as we could, because he was usually pretty timely. We asked everyone who came in, but no one had seen Old George in any of the usual places. They found him the next morning under a freeway overpass, his body stiff, contorted. It gets cold in Salt Lake in the winter. Not a bad way to go, they say, to fall asleep and not wake up—except his sleeping bag was torn and he was cut on his back and arms. Might have been critters, after the fact. Or vigilantes. Passions have cooled some since a homeless street preacher kidnapped Elizabeth Smart a few years ago and raped her for nine months. But the Salt Lake Valley still isn't the most hospitable place for guys like Old George—especially since, with his long frame and grey beard, he looked a lot like that guy. Anyway, Old George died.

Not knowing his next of kin at the time, we put together a service, got him a cemetery plot and even a bronze plaque. "George Murphy," it read. "Age: Old Enough." "Hey Old George, how old *are* you?" we'd ask. "Old enough," he'd say.

I remember his graceful lope, his body all limbs and sinew, a sweeping, Mr. Natural glide. He spent a lot of time in the library, like a lot of folks here. As a group they are the best-read people I know, and Old George always seemed to have a new quote at the ready. "Age, with his stealing steps / Hath clawed me in his clutch," he said to me a few days before he died. Hamlet. Buried in that dusky exterior was a bright light, but somewhere along the way, ambition went dark. Sliding off the edge of life, once you lose your grip, is a lot easier than most realize.

He got by on SSI and scrounging. The people at Desert Industries—that's the LDS version of Goodwill—had come to like Old George, and gave him the run of their dumpster. There's a wind chime hanging over the entrance to the shelter that Old George found. Every once in a while I'd come into my office and find some treasure,