

Missing Pieces

It's a funny thing that happens when you lose everything...

Actually, it's not funny to lose anything, but when you get so numb from loss you start finding yourself laughing at everything. I used to cry over lots of things; a misplaced set of salt and pepper shakers would stress me out to the point of complete exhaustion. A missing heirloom handed down from my great, great, grandmother spiraled me into a depression for weeks until it was eventually discovered in a most unfortunate place. (It's remarkable how generations-old silver doesn't tarnish even after passing through canine colon.) A lost pair of lucky socks had me in a fit of hysterics until I realized I had been wearing them all along—being intensely drawn and emotionally affected by material goods doesn't bode well for one as clumsy and forgetful as myself.

And yes, back to those aforementioned "things." I have always liked "things." Things and stuffs and whatnots consumed my visions of reality. Happiness was not measured by personal achievement or good health, but instead by owning every material good I eyed, coveted, lusted after. It wasn't even a matter of having the wealth to buy the objects; it was just a matter of having the objects themselves. I could re-trace the history of my obsession, but to what good would it do me? Would figuring it all out right now put everything back in my hands? If I jump to what I know is true and just say "Aha! It's because of my mother!" would it make me less of an addict? Less of a chump? Less of a loser? Less, less, less loss? I doubt it. Besides, this isn't about her.

So back to those “things.” Trinkets, doo-dads, whatchamacallits. I started collecting objects of desire sometime in my twelfth year. It was my birthday and my Aunt Clara was brushing my hair. She said to me sweetly, “you’re almost a teenager now, my dear. What would you like for your last year of childhood?” I turned to look at her, then pointedly pointed my pointer finger forward and commanded “your pendant.” Aunt Clara wore a pendant adorned with rubies on a daily basis, for as long as I could remember, and for as long as I could remember, it wasn’t something I ever really cared about. But, for some reason, in that moment it was all I could think of. “M-my pendant? Sweetie, why would you want such an old thing?” She asked, clutching nervously at the chain around her neck. I shrugged my shoulders, “I dunno, but it’s what I want.”

“We’ll get you something much nicer than this relic, dear. How about a Barbie dream house?”

She tried so hard to negotiate.

“No, I want your pendant.”

“Maybe a fun jigsaw puzzle?”

“Your pendant”

“That new book in the girl detective series you like?”

“No, I said, I want your pendant.”

It went on in this fashion for some time. And I mean it when I say that I never cared or gave a damn about that pendant before, but I wanted it then, and nothing else would satisfy my need. For my birthday she ended up buying me a Barbie dream house, a jigsaw puzzle and the newest book in the *Fanny McPherson, Kid Private Eye* series, but not the one thing I asked for, not the one thing I truly *needed*. I badgered her every day for the next two months until my mom threatened to un-invite her from any further family events and she finally caved and handed over

her prized pendant. The pendant given to her by her husband the day before he was struck and killed by a drunk driver while walking to the market. I lost it somewhere in my toy chest a day or two later. I cried and kicked up a fuss until my mom found it tangled in one of my Barbie's hair.

But that's how it began and has been ever since. Well, up until recently that is. If something shiny caught my eye, I needed it. If I didn't have the money for it, I'd make someone get it for me. If someone couldn't get it for me, I'd steal it. Whatever needed to be done to get whatever it was I was looking at onto my person. Then once I'd own it, it's novelty would wear off soon after and I'd usually end up losing it or breaking it, then breaking down until it was rescued or restored, just to be plopped away on a shelf, in a corner, under a couch, until it was out of sight and out of mind. That's not to say that it wasn't still something I *needed* to own, oh no, but I just didn't need to think about it as much anymore.

After years of my avid "collecting," my father finally snapped. He insisted on me moving out since my "worthless crap," as he affectionately called it, was cluttering up the entire house. My mom didn't have much to say on the matter, she had checked out from any form of conversation not long after that birthday. Left to my own devices for the first time in my life, I had to scrounge for odd jobs here and there to afford rent. Unfortunately, a large chunk of every paycheck I brought home was engulfed by the "buy it now" option on online auction sites. You'd be surprised how upset landlords get when you consistently miss rent. You'd also be surprised at how many landlords know one another and spread word of delinquent tenants. I was out of luck, but not out potluck bowls—I owned a multitude of those in all different shapes and sizes.

Eventually my mom wired me a few grand from what she had saved from her disability checks and I was able to move into a cramped apartment in the ghetto that asked for money upfront. They didn't care much about timely payments, since no one wanted to live in a bug-

infested apartment where a kitchen, living room and bedroom were all contained in just one small space. Fortunately the bathroom occupied its own separate space, but just barely. I didn't care anyway; to me a place to live was not a place to lay my head, but instead a storage facility for all of my items.

It was a museum of novelties that no one wanted, but I simply could not live without. My "apartment" was adorned with Persian rugs, China cats, voodoo dolls, and every kind of kitschy piece of décor you could find. They lined bookshelves, were hung up on walls, the papers of authenticity and receipts for goods purchased stacked on tables, chairs, in the oven, behind nightstands. I slept on a pile of clothing on top of a pile of old newspapers on top of a mattress that was on top of the creaky floor in the middle of the livingkitchenbedroom. I didn't invite anyone over to my new place for drinks. I didn't have friends come visit for movie nights. I didn't ask family to bring food for big potluck dinners (though I owned enough ceramic bowls to have even extended family take part in it.) I slept alone, my only guests being the rats I could hear gnawing their way through the walls, the roaches that burst forth from the shower drain, and the mice that could be heard chewing on paper from under furniture. It wasn't that I was ashamed of my living condition, it was just that I couldn't bear to have peopling ogling my collections, lusting after my goods, coveting my things. That simply wasn't going to happen.

I suppose I lied, I didn't always sleep alone. But when I slept with company, it was far away from my collectibles. You could say I started collecting men, too—but I didn't need them or having any interest in displaying them in my abode. When I was in between paychecks I'd spend my time in the arms of lovers, coaxing them with my body to buy me things I couldn't afford myself, or stealing sports trophies, music memorabilia, vintage records and dirty magazines from their childhood bedrooms, under their mattresses, right off their mantles. It was

such a rush when I'd successfully exit with the items of my choosing, a well-deserved payoff for nights in their arms panicking, afraid that someone may have ransacked my apartment while I was away. Sex was such a distraction they wouldn't notice anything was missing until weeks later. When they caught on they'd call and call and call. Soon I started collecting angry messages from ex flames. Fortunately my phone was so buried under stuff I couldn't even find it to answer their vitriol-filled calls even if I wanted to.

When I unexpectedly found myself pregnant with twins a realization hit me: something had to change. As I eyed the layers of dust covering everything in my room, I worried about the health of my two impending items. I promptly went out and bought a pink feather duster. Then a green one. Then a purple one. Then a variety of farm-animal decorated brooms and dustpans. Then an old fashioned vacuum cleaner. I had all the tools at my disposal for change but disposal was the actual change I needed, but it wasn't going to come that easily.

Flash forward five years: two young girls playing happily in a big backyard, roaming the spacious ground at their feet, without a care in the world. Their mother watching from the inside looking out, sipping coffee from a mug adorned with piggies, standing in their big kitchen, the smell of pancakes wafting in the air. That's me. Those are my girls. That's my spacious backyard, my big kitchen, my piggy mug, my pancakes. My house is sparse, but filled with love. Yes, I got better.

I wish I could say it happened after that cleaning-supplies-buying-spree, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. Unfortunately it took another year of living in cramped, dusty squalor. Unfortunately it took one of my babies landing in the hospital for weeks because of a severe asthma attack. Unfortunately it was because CPS had to examine our surroundings and ended up taking away my other baby in the process. Then they sent the men in. The "sweepers,"

they called them. The men who made me stand there and watch as they took away every single item I acquired in my life up until that point. Every old newspaper, every magazine clipping, every set of nesting dolls, every poster, every trophy, every piece of furniture, every rug swept out from under my feet. I didn't have a say in the matter—not only did I lose my things, my children and my home, but I lost my voice. Literally, I screamed and cried until I was so hoarse I couldn't say a thing. I guess that was for the best. The last thing I saw before I passed out was them tossing that ruby pendant into the wastebasket.

With everything I ever wanted gone from my life in one fell swoop, I had to learn how to live a simple life before I could even think about getting my kids back. It was hard, but I did it. I did it and then some, actually. After I lost everything I really began to find myself—I know, it's so trite but it's true. I found my calling in life working for a successful non-profit agency, I found my children back in my arms, I found love—with another human being, not with a series of meaningless items. Someone who fell in love with me, someone who fell in love with my laugh. Sometimes you just have to let go and let God and I did. I had a family. I had personal achievement. I had good health—I had it all. From loss I found love.

So there I was, my two girls running around in the backyard while I watched upon them, smiling, sipping from my piggy mug. What a silly mug it was, just a blue mug with little pink piggies running all over it. I studied it and laughed. “I wonder if they have other ones like these with different animals...” I thought to myself. “Maybe horses? Chickens? Frogs?” It turns out a cutesy décor site from Hong Kong had all of those and more. “But a mug collection is practical, we all need things to drink from...” I pleaded with my husband, but he didn't get it. How could he not understand how important this was to me? Why didn't my kids get that when I'd be locked away in our library fiercely bidding on old chess sets that it was for our family's not-yet-

in-existence game nights? How could neither they nor my husband see that it was something that could bring our family together? And why didn't my boss trust me when I said that I had to take weeks off to travel to state fairs and flea markets to scour for rare encyclopedias from the 1800s for research for an upcoming project? What made my need for these objects so unbelievable? Why couldn't I have things? Why can't I lust after items? Why can't I have love, health and material goods all at once? I had to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Just laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh...

It's a funny thing that happens when you get everything you want.

You lose it all before you even realize what you had.