



image info

Schrodinger's Vase

Andrea Hansell

"Does anyone else want the vase?" I asked.

I DIDN'T KNOW THE VASE WAS UGLY UNTIL long after it passed into my possession. My mother-in-law, helping me unpack boxes in our new house, drew in a sharp breath when I pulled my treasure out of its cocoon of bubble wrap. "Are you planning to put that in the living room?" she asked. "Because I was thinking the basement might be a better home for it."

Seeing the hurt on my face, she added, "Would you like me to give you a pretty new vase as a house gift?"

I looked down at the object in my hands and tried to see it through her discerning eyes. It was a massive, rectangular block of leaded crystal etched with deep, crosshatched lines. It was neither typical of some grand bygone era nor impressively unique. Lacking any of the delicate beauty one associates with the words "crystal vase," it was oversized, ungainly, a leaded hippopotamus wallowing in my hands.

"But it was my grandmother's," I protested. "She brought it over from Russia!"

It was unlikely this was true. Surely my young grandmother, her skirt ragged, her long hair braided, had not walked down the boat ramp at Ellis Island holding an enormous vase she had lugged from her tiny village. Where had the vase really come from? A wedding present, perhaps, or a prize won in a raffle at her Brooklyn synagogue.

When I first met the vase, it sat atop the grand piano wedged into my grandparents' small, crowded apartment. They had sacrificed for that

piano, and my father and his equally unmusical siblings had paid for the sacrifice with hours of tortured music lessons. By the time I came along, the piano was hopelessly out of tune and good only for the banging out of an off-key version of "Chopsticks." But its polished wood surface held the glory that was the vase.

Through the lens of childhood memory, I see the vase as the only bright object in a dark room. It emits slanting rays of light like the beams that shine from treasure chests in storybook illustrations. Though sometimes filled with flowers, at Passover time it always holds fresh spring pussy willows. Where my grandmother found pussy willows in the concrete expanse of Brooklyn is a mystery.

Sleepy, bored, unnoticed by the adults as they drank sweet tea and discussed politics, I would circle the tiny living room. The china shepherdess on the curio shelf was of some interest when freight trains rumbled by under the window, because she would dance and shake and there was always the exciting chance that one of her little sheep would skitter its way off the shelf, particularly if helped along by a small hand. The silver candy dish might, especially at holiday time, contain some wrapped treats, never as good as I hoped, just dusty old lemon drops, but sugar was sugar. My last stop was the piano, which I was not allowed to play while there was adult conversation going on. I would stand by the vase, caressing the softness of the pussy willows and tracing the deep diagonal

lines in the crystal with my fingertips—criss cross, criss cross. Some grown-up would always tell me, “Be careful, don’t break Grandma’s vase, honey!”

My grandmother herself never chided me. She knew I was a well-behaved and responsible child, one who could be trusted to help her lay out the good china on the holiday table. And I knew myself that the vase was unbreakable. It stood solid and unmoving even when the trains shook the whole apartment and the teacups and sugar cubes rattled against the saucers.

When my grandmother died I was on a horseback trek through the Rocky Mountains. In the early afternoon, after a peanut butter sandwich lunch, I dozed briefly in a green grove of aspens. Waking, I saw a girl in a long skirt standing in a patch of sunlight a little way up the trail. She waved at me and turned to leave. I scrambled up to follow her and watched her long, lustrous black hair morph into the tail of my grazing horse. When I arrived saddle-sore back at the ranch hours later I was handed a message on a folded square of paper. It did not surprise me to learn that my grandmother had died earlier that day—my grandmother, who, as a child, had long, silky black hair that made people want to pet her as though she were a kitten. Being an Orthodox Jew, she had to be buried within twenty-four hours of her death. It was too late for me to catch a plane back east in time for her funeral. But I knew she had already bid me good-bye along the trail.

I lay in my bunk at the ranch and pictured her wrapped naked in a white shroud and encased in a plain pine box. This was the Jewish custom, that all of us, from the most powerful king to the poorest street beggar, would leave the world as simply as we came into it. I had seen some of the fancy coffins at Christian funerals, and, though I was grown up now, I had a childish wish that my

grandmother, too, could be laid to rest in a coffin of gleaming mahogany lined with red velvet. This fantasy wandered from the Christian to the Egyptian. Let her be buried with her possessions, too, the china shepherdess and her flock tucked in beside her, and the vase—the vase!—held in her folded arms.

I arrived on the east coast in time to join the other relatives at the suburban retirement community where my grandmother lived at the end. For years after my grandfather’s death she had stayed put in her Brooklyn apartment as her neighborhood crumbled around her and the locks on her door multiplied. In her late eighties she still climbed the steep steps to take the D train into Manhattan, where sometimes she would meet me at a café near my workplace. Nibbling a delicate pastry, sipping the coffee she always ordered “very hot, with just a little cream,” she always insisted she was fine, that my parents shouldn’t worry. She would tell me dark stories from her Russian childhood, how she had hidden with her sisters in a pigpen breathing in the stench of swine with the smoke of her burning village, but questions about her life now were always answered with sunny superlatives. “I love my neighborhood,” she would say. “I feel safe because people know me there. I am 100 percent happy.”

After my grandmother was robbed at knife point in the elevator of her building, her frail shoulder broken by a parting shove from her assailant, her children persuaded her to move to the retirement village near my aunt’s house. She never complained about moving, though she had left sixty years of memories behind in the Brooklyn apartment along with her synagogue and the corner bakery that made her favorite cinnamon rugelach. I wondered if after all these years she missed even the familiar jarring rumble of passing trains, but if she did

she wouldn’t have told me. She liked the card games and the soup at the new place, she said. Of course she was happy.

After my grandmother’s death I waited with my cousins in her room, inhaling her familiar scent of talcum powder and rose-scented hand lotion, as my aunt sorted through her possessions. She hadn’t left much, my aunt said, but she urged us each to take something meaningful to us. I watched as my cousins chose silky scarves, costume jewelry, an almost full bottle of Chanel #5. “Does anyone else want the vase?” I asked.

I had spotted it as soon as I entered the room, dwarfing the small side table it sat on. Though it was late summer, it still held pussy willows, which crumbled to dust when I stroked them.

The cousins didn’t want it. The vase was mine. It followed me to various living rooms over the years. It lived on bookshelves and on fireplace mantels. In the house I lived in when my children were small, it sat on a sofa table behind the couch, where it appeared prominently in the background of many posed family pictures. If the vase was empty, the shining top of it would perch on a child’s hair like a crown. Filled with pussy willows in spring, it shot furred branches out of the tops of taller people’s heads.

It was in our next house, our grown-up house, where my mother-in-law informed me that the vase was “unattractive,” that it didn’t belong. It spent an inglorious week in the basement. Then I moved it back to the table behind the sofa in the new living room where the sunlight from the large, modern windows bounced off it to cast rainbows on the honey-colored wood floor. I couldn’t help myself. Though I now knew it was ugly, hideous even, the vase was my grandmother’s and I loved it still.

The accident happened on the first Thanksgiving in the new house. The kitchen smelled of roasting turkey and bubbling

cranberry sauce. My daughter and my nieces were decorating place cards for the table. My son, eleven years old, was delighting in the fact that his youngest cousin, a pudgy blob of baby when last encountered, was now a three-year-old enthralled by the attention of a bigger boy. They had played with my son’s old toy trucks, dipped fingers into the whipped cream for the pumpkin pies, jumped together in the crisp leaf piles outside. Now my son, cheeks still rosy from November cold, showed his little cousin how to jump on and off the sofa.

No one took a video, but we might as well have. The action is frozen vividly in the minds of my sisters-in-law, who were watching as the boys hurled themselves shrieking off the couch. Trajectories crossed, my son bumped into his little cousin, the cousin in turn bumped the vase, the vase slid off the sofa table and appeared to hover in slow motion in the air before crashing to the wood floor. There were many tears then, the tears of an older child who knew he had led a younger one astray, the tears of a little boy who thought he had done something terribly wrong and might be punished, and my tears as I knelt in a puddle of water and took in the ruin of strewn chrysanthemums and broken crystal.

I thought the vase was gone that day, but it wasn’t. Like [Schrodinger’s famous cat](#) that was simultaneously alive and dead, the vase is here with me as much as ever. It still floats in the autumn air about to break, watched by two frightened boys now grown and bearded. It makes mischief on the sofa table in our first small house, pinning pussy willow antlers to the head of my now-dead husband as he poses with me for a spring birthday photo. And the vase stands perpetually tall on the polished piano, my grandmother watching as my small fingers forever trace the etched grooves in the shining crystal. ♦