

Dishes

Keltie Zubko



image info

Twelve place settings of china, good china, bought for a hope chest; eight of everyday dishes, when the kids brought their friends for dinner; then four for just the two of them and maybe a couple for visiting kids or guests.

CLIMBING THE STEP LADDER TO THE high reaches of the old-fashioned kitchen, she met the heat like it was a barricade, invisible and heavy, accumulated near the ceiling from the summer sun but also from decades of cooking she had to push through to stand and get her bearings before opening the cupboard door. The worst of the morning sickness had abated, but she felt a tide of wooziness lurking, ready to sweep over her and knock her onto the sharp-edged countertops, down to the dizzying checkered floor. She gripped the cupboard door, taking slow, deep breaths of the stifling air. A cranky fly buzzed and fought in a corner somewhere, and she strained to hear any trace of the old woman's breathing from below in the alcove off the kitchen. How long was it since the home care nurse had trundled her into the kitchen, talking her through every move while placing her on the little couch as carefully as a swaddled baby? She had tried to talk to her mother-in-law, too, but couldn't get any response and gave up. Strips of light from the afternoon sun slipped through the blinds and cut across the room, distorting everything. She considered climbing down and adjusting them but didn't want to disturb her balance, so she turned her back on the alcove and the window to get on with the task.

There was no one else to do it. Her husband couldn't take the time off work and his sister hadn't surfaced from her travels yet. Her mother-in-law was supposed to do it, or at least help, but the stroke cut that short. So she now lay dozing and drifting away instead of advising and watching someone

else handle her past—sort, judge, divide and dispose of it. No wonder the old woman withdrew.

She paused, peering in at the dishes on the top shelf with its gaping door. The paint on the cupboards was thick, preserving in its layers decades of family history. Unlike their condo's minimalist open shelving, these cupboards were enclosed right to the top, concealing their secrets. At least she wouldn't have to wash anything before boxing it away for the consignment shop or the Salvation Army. The stuff at the top in their place got gummy with dust and cooking grease, and they didn't have things worth displaying anyway, just Amazon Basics in neutral colors and smooth utilitarian contours.

Something around her stirred and shifted.

Heat lay over everything like a heavy blanket. The laboring refrigerator trickled and gurgled, picking at her confidence, while a fan in the room outside the kitchen repeated its mantra to get it done, get it done. The dishes themselves in the top cupboards called to her in loud whispers as she poised there, contemplating the dim recesses of the top shelf. She felt the same anxiety just before entering a crowded party of strangers or a kindergarten full of rowdy kids competing with their eager stories. Below her on the counter, empty boxes with handwritten labels lined up, ready to be filled: sell, recycle, give away, donate. There were also some boxes for her absent sister-in-law. She didn't have a box for herself.

She opened all the cupboards at the top within her reach, letting the doors fan out, releasing pent-up air, and scanned the

contents, deciding where to start. A whole army of cups and mugs in discordant variety waited defiantly. Cheap souvenirs stood beside fine old china that still carried some ancestor’s luck, unbroken after being kept wrapped and hidden all the way from Ireland or Poland. There was hand-built stoneware, exquisite Beleek, comical and crude joke mugs—keepsakes still despite being cracked and crazed. It was like a whole cupboard of oddball relatives, each with their own history, ready to tell it in colorful detail for whoever wanted coffee or tea or hot chocolate in the long, bright kitchen.

Up the step ladder in the heights of the room’s tall ceiling, everything looked strange. One shelf held teetering stacks of little plates, each one different, memorializing some part of the family past with no one left to tell it, hear it, or cherish it. Old-fashioned and ornate china rested there like a reliquary of long-dead blood and bone, she thought, half-remembering brief sketches of some stories she hadn’t really listened to.

A cookie jar in the shape of Mother Hubbard’s old shoe held crumbs of ancient cookies caught in its stoneware hollows. Baby dishes both practical and impractical rested on one side. Who ever used such things now, made of heavy ceramics? Her fingertips nudged a tiny silver spoon amid brittle Ikea bowls and Happy Meal plates scarred by children dropping or flinging them. Which had been worse, she wondered, life at the mercy of babies or time spent high in the cupboard, bearing heat and neglect? It must have been decades, she thought, considering the age of her husband and his sister. Nesting cups waited again for juice and small hands. Indestructible spoons, faded Disney dishes, and blunted forks held

out hope to be used once more. She doubted that would happen.

She wished she could talk to her mother-in-law. She should have done it before everything changed. Now she was on a journey with no guidelines, no one to tell you how it should go. All the Googling in the world wouldn’t answer her questions. What to do with these dishes, what they meant, how to disperse all this stuff if they weren’t going to move in and take it over, assuming the weight of family tales and traditions.

Take that blue bowl, she thought. What should she do with it?

She couldn’t tell if the ones at the top were treasures or junk consigned to such inconvenient cupboards. Reaching in there felt like sticking her fingers through cobwebs that clung and stuck and dragged her deeper inside when all she wanted to do was climb down and escape back to her own cupboards that had no history, no threats, no unsatisfied dilemmas. Yet.

Another shelf hid all the survivors from successive sets of dishes, she could tell, symbols and forlorn last remainders just like the old woman living alone in that huge house. She imagined the progression as if someone was whispering it in her ear as she poked in the cupboard: Twelve place settings of china, good china, bought for a hope chest; eight of everyday dishes, when the kids brought their friends for dinner; then four for just the two of them and maybe a couple for visiting kids or guests; and now a cupboard of mismatched dishes from each of those hopeful sets and stages, the others used up, smashed, lost, or given away.

She glanced down again at her mother-in-law, slumped back on the little couch, eyes shut. Dust motes blurred the yellow light

from the afternoon sun, making it soft and fuzzy. She wondered what memories her baby would have of a twelfth-floor condo, barely 750 square feet, remote and cushioned from the street and even the students and young professional couples next door.

She looked into the top shelf directly in front of her. She had to at least make a start. The empty boxes assembled below on the old countertop were beginning to mock her. She would do just this one cupboard.

She reached for a plate by itself on the shelf, set apart from the rest of the clutter. Okay, this plate. Why wasn’t it with the others?



IF MY DISHES COULD TALK.

She lay on the couch that even now held the imprint of her husband, sprawled out in that cozy spot to read tidbits from the paper while she cooked or cleaned. The kids played nearby when they were very young; later, with friends over, they would forage for food and then retreat to distant parts of the house. If she could laugh, she would have laughed: What would her son do in that tiny condo when their child needed such space? But she couldn’t make a sound, so let the thought fly away, like they all did these days.

The couch was more comfortable than the wheelchair. She let her eyes close a bit more. She didn’t want to watch. Why would that home care nurse think she’d want to watch? At least the girl didn’t press her. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t speak. And she didn’t care about the damn dishes any longer, anyway.

Except sometimes her useless hand tingled and yearned to pick them up again.

Empty now, forgotten perhaps, but still she would be happy to touch them once more: the Peter Rabbit dish that couldn’t be set down in front of mischievous toddler hands without supervision, forcing her to pay attention. Or the tiny silver spoon with its long, slender stem, depositing colorful pureed vegetables into a little mouth. The baby girl grew up and left. The baby boy grew up and married this paragon who arrived to clean out her cupboards, but at least did it reluctantly, not quite insensitive to the dishes in the crowded cupboards around her head.

She had seen it in the girl’s eyes, those questions. Was it trash, odds and ends that had no meaning or point? Or was it a strange and valuable cache? What was essential? Or was it time to let it all go? She didn’t care. They weren’t her questions any longer. Let whoever would have a new start start here, even if it had to be with those boring mass-produced basics that wouldn’t make tales nor tell tales.

Despite the heat, a shiver went through her bones, now as thin and brittle as the ancient Irish china. Her dishes knew it all, from beginning to end, the truth of those countless days that had been lived and then wrapped up and put away, stowed in the cupboards to be forgotten. The legion of meals, day upon day. All those times that couldn’t be tallied or remembered. Put away in the deep cupboards atop the hot kitchen, rendered forgetful and inert through time and the passage of more time. The girl was awakening them.

There were lonely pieces from her kids’ friends, even now. The Tupperware had gone a long time ago—from the snacks and sandwiches she’d made for all those

ravenous teenagers, or leftovers packed up from family dinners—sent out into the world not like a benediction, but rather a mere wish and a small hope because that was all she could manage. There were so many remnants. Cutlery that belonged to the mother of her son’s first girlfriend, the mother so difficult and particular, and the girl wanting to live at their house like her fork and spoon still did. Mugs with funny sayings from her daughter’s boyfriends each evoked a certain face—expectant or disappointed. Cookie sheets and casserole dishes rested now, but once hosted a mountain of sustenance, emptied and filled, washed and refilled, one small certainty in the uncertainties of life.

Dishes lurked there with stories she didn’t even know: an inheritance from other old people, alone but leaving her all they had, no descendants but plenty of memories to hand over before they departed. She felt them watching the process consigning them to the ranks of the forgotten. She would be there someday soon too. She lay immobile on the couch in the alcove of the kitchen, but feeling the dishes gathered around her, insisting on a last remembrance.

Now if she had something to drink, it wouldn’t be from the ranks of her eccentric mugs, but something non-breakable like they would give a small child. She tried not to sink too far back into the cushions the nurse had arranged around her. They drew her deep into comfort, and she was almost ready to stop resisting.

Where was her daughter? She could help, but had such a large slice of her father’s unruliness and was off in the world somewhere, gathering or abandoning her own cadre of dishes.

Meanwhile, she waited, silent and alone amid the jumbled dishes of the past. The elephant teapot. The stack of plates for their work parties. Serving dishes, all different, each one calling forth an event or a history lesson. They’d gathered for ten, thirty, fifty or more years in her cupboards, in her house, washed and put away, brought out and used, repositories for much more than food.

She watched the dishes emerge from their secret places as the girl examined and agonized over them, trying to decide how to divide and disperse. The girl had boxes for things. She had garbage, recycling, give-aways, consignments. But nothing yet, it seemed, to keep. She perched up there, judging it all, each dish, each day of her life—her choices, her failures, her losses, her few successes.

She hadn’t answered the girl’s last question and couldn’t remember how long she’d been there. She seemed to be talking to herself, or maybe she was just hearing voices. The question still echoed in the silence between them.

“So what should I do with all this stuff? It can’t go with you. It can’t come to us. What do we do with it?” She’d had no answer, wished she could let the dishes speak for her, wished they would not be silent any longer.

“What about this one?” The girl held up the plate, addressing the heavy air, “Does this have any special significance?” The old woman couldn’t answer but another voice did.

“Hmmm. Not sure I’d keep it if I were you.”

The girl flinched and reached to steady herself. She peered into the alcove, but couldn’t see her mother-in-law’s face. “Why not?”

The voice continued.



“Many times it almost went back to its owner, into the garbage, or to someone else, just to get rid of it. Several times it almost got smashed on this very floor. Smashed deliberately. But somehow, it survived and just stayed here.”

The old woman listened too. She’d done all her talking, and reclined back into the shadows, watching through half-lidded eyes.

That odd plate, not her taste at all, was brought to some event at their home by one of her husband’s admirers. They thought she didn’t know, but she had known, played along with them, was charming even. She

welcomed the other woman, bided her time, ate the rich squares off the plate, so cloying they almost made her gag. She shared them with the others who had probably known, too, yet didn’t let it show. Somehow the woman had not taken her plate, or come back for it. There it sat in the cupboard for many years afterward, occupying a tiny piece of her territory. No, she didn’t let any of them gather real dust, but nor did she use it or flaunt it.

It had lain there in its solitude, even till the point of his funeral reception. She closed her eyes against that memory. The plate was on

the reception buffet on the long table here in this house, and the other woman didn't take it back then, either, while his ashes rested in their urn, ready to disperse. She saw them fluttering down upon the heads of all those women, a halo of gray, a halo of dust, no more lust or luscious flesh, all turned to ashes. She had been the last to lay beside him, like the plate lay in the cupboard, abandoned, forgotten. Yes, that plate rested, unfilled in the cupboard, unfillable and empty.

Had the girl listened? She didn't know, but then she asked, "And this one?" Once again a voice answered.

"Now that one I had to keep, that one from my own mother-in-law, heavy and pretty ugly, wouldn't you say?"

The girl lifted it with care. She braced herself on the ladder. The sun had moved lower and the stripes from the blinds faded, but the kitchen remained oppressive up there. She gazed down on the room as if from the distance of compressed time superimposing events one upon the others, decades of life all contained in this one modest room of comfort and sorrow.

"What about this one?" she asked again, not sure if she'd already asked the question and heard the answer.

That was from her great grandmother on her father's side, had been carted across the prairies, a single cheap stoneware platter, ugly and unadorned, now chipped and scratched. But it still remembered the homestead fare it once held, there in the remote, uncleared bush then later at the modest house in town, at countless gatherings. No one looked at the china when a roasted chicken rested golden in its crispy skin and succulent juices, adorned by heaps of vegetables. The weight of the

old stoneware pulled at her hand. The old woman felt it in the deadened nerves of her fingertips and then felt others too: the crock that once bubbled in the dark with its gaseous contents, a rock weighing down the kraut, now such a delicacy. She felt again the imperfections on the heavy crock, collectible in itself, and then her touch drifted over to rest on her great grandmother's pot for bone broth. Not trendy then, but all they had, essential against the bitter winter that dogged their chores under the freezing sky as they breathed the icy wind outside, then the comforting heat from the woodstove inside.

The young woman set the platter down carefully on the counter, uncertain which box to stow it in.

There was more in the cupboard. She felt swoony for a second and lowered her arms. It wasn't just the heat lurking there. She reached up again and drew out the luminous blue bowl, paused and looked into it, seeing a reflection of her own pale face as if from deep watery depths.

The bowl from the sushi-making birthday party. The old woman remembered the scene, in this kitchen, this house, not so bleak back then. The blue bowl came from the man with the unassuageable longing. There had been rice in that bowl. It was his idea, their friend, to invite mutual friends for all to make sushi on her husband's birthday that year. A strange idea, but nice to gather the laughing group now long since disbanded to illness and death. Younger then, and happy to learn the rudiments of making sushi despite the undercurrents of unfulfilled longing and sadness that wafted over them all. A strange birthday. Not hers, thank goodness.

Their friend had provided all the tools and



supplies: seaweed and sticky rice; the sharp, sweet vinegar; wasabi; pickled ginger; crisp vegetables; the bamboo rolling mats; fish that lay too raw and unfamiliar but provocative on her tongue. And the bowl he'd used for the rice.

After the party was over and friends were leaving, she washed that bowl, assembling what he'd brought for the party into a clean and waiting group on their big wood block countertop. She slid her hands over it to remove the remaining traces of rice and skidded clear warm water over it to rinse the suds. She stared into its deep blue, translucent in countless layers over unseen depths, an intensity at its center that none of them could fathom. It was a mirror she peered into, daydreaming while the guests trickled out of their house, wishing her husband happy birthday and goodnight.

It may have been ostensibly for her husband, but she knew the party was really for her, a polite fiction because he would never overstep the boundaries of respect and friendship. Yet when she, at the end of the evening, extended her hand to him with the blue bowl carefully held out, their fingers touched as he reached to take it from her and then quickly withdrew. He gave a half bow, ignoring her husband, as if from a different age or time or place and told her to keep it in remembrance.

"Of what?" she asked.

He didn't answer, but wished them goodnight and left.

So the bowl resided in her cupboard. She brought it out and stared into it, washing it by hand always caught in searching its depths, like it was a window to an alternate past, or worse, an alternate future.



The young woman gave no sign she'd heard the story, but placed the bowl down on the countertop, alone. She straightened up and stood examining the kitchen from her elevated perspective. It was grimy up here perhaps, she thought, but cleaning and a coat of paint could fix that. The layout of the kitchen was good, though a few updates would help. There was room for more than one child—several, perhaps—and maybe a dog, not like the tiny condo kitchen with the same character and dimensions as all the others in their building.

The old woman squeezed her eyes together, then opened them again. She'd just have to be satisfied with what had been. Her daughter was gone and her son and this girl had their condo. Soon all the dishes would depart too. She had no control over that. They waited, hushed, to see what would happen to that platter, ugly old thing that it was, or the baby dishes, the tea pot, the silver, the cups.

Once she, the old woman herself, would have placed that platter at the bottom of a box, loaded with other choices for the Salvation Army, but now she saw the girl reach for it, pick it up and hesitate, weighing it in her hands. She clasped it together with the baby spoon, its bowl the shape of a tiny mouth. She held them close to her and looked down at the boxes, still mostly empty. She glanced at the plate that had rested all by itself, wondering if she could assume that burden and decided she could not. Then she took the heavy chipped platter and placed it deliberately in a large and clear spot by itself, added the delicate spoon, a few eccentric but ingratiating mugs, the mysterious elephant teapot, and then, too, the glimmering blue bowl.

The blue bowl seemed to take a deep breath and settle down on the countertop, sighing in relief. It reflected the light around it, moving down the walls until it faded into the alcove off the kitchen. ❖