



A Little Parcel of Things

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MEAGERLY COLORED PAGES torn from coloring books stuck to the walls. Halloween greeting cards with marshmallows glued on them stuck to the walls. Family holiday pictures stuck to the walls. Homemade signs and cards and letters and random pieces of packing material stuck to the walls.

Eric hadn't thought of his mother

as a hoarder, more of a sentimental consumer of knick-knacks. But the goat path created by her wall-to-wall neighborhood memorial made him question his evaluation. He saw most of the items on the walls as junk—valuable during a holiday, for a week or so after the gifting, and then losing value and becoming paper destined for the trash. Especially disturbing

was the fact that he had cleaned the same walls during his last visit. He had removed each piece and collected them in a folder that slipped very easily in a desk. He had assured his mother that she could keep and view the items without having them clutter her walls; they were as accessible in a desk drawer as on a wall. She had agreed, but over the ensuing few years, she had collected and stuck to the walls more than double what he had removed.

He knew his mother idolized the children and families who gifted this homemade artwork. At some point he realized that their proximity diluted her connection to her own children. Still, it was beyond him why she would violate her walls with scotch tape to display such miserly trinkets. He figured it was all she had. She lived alone, missed her husband and her children, and the perpetual sound of the television marked the passing of minutes, hours, days. She looked forward to each gift, the interaction upon giving, the hugs goodbye. And he understood what she thought of as she viewed the mess; while Eric saw trash, his mother saw love and affection.

Eric had some hours before dinner with his siblings, so he took the opportunity to begin the process of decluttering the walls, the most obvious way he saw to begin his task. He felt the easiest and fastest method would be to discard all of it, but he had promised he would only organize, not discard.

He gently removed the items stuck to the walls and placed them in a neat pile for his siblings to sort through and ultimately make a meaningful decision on what to do with it all.

Eric had volunteered to sort his mother's belongings. He would work alone in her home until his siblings could join him on the weekend, at which point they would make group decisions on what to keep, what to donate, what to toss. They called it their organizational plan. They didn't know what else to call it; none of them had experience processing an entire lifetime of belongings of two parents. His job was to put together each collection in one room—like a museum for his mother's things. But the lengthy process of removing cherished greeting cards from the walls—evidence of how much people loved his mother, how much she did for them, how wonderful she was in so many ways—reminded Eric that for a long time there was a great distance between him and his mother, between his siblings and his mother. It seemed she had given up on the six of them and found comfort only in the trinkets she was slowly buried in.

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The precious porcelain child with teardrop eyes sat on a glass shelf in the gift shop of the hospital where she worked. The simple clothing painted in soft pastels, the oversized head with mournful eyes, the young child

holding a bright red heart to his chest, and the printed phrase “Forever in my heart” on the base spoke to Louise of a longing she was familiar with, of disappointments and simple pleasures, of a melancholy that stubbornly held on to hope. Louise purchased it, took it home. No comment from her husband other than a disgruntled “Ah.” But she was fine with that; she bought it for herself, for the comfort it provided, for a place to store what she hid in her own heart. It was something she cherished.



The last surfaces Eric cleared were the doors on the curio cabinet. He used a razor blade to scrape the tape and artwork from the glass, revealing his mother’s Precious Moments collection. She purchased her first figurine long after he had left home, but he had known about it, questioned her as to its importance, wondered how it could affect a woman with an advanced degree. She tried to explain to him the simple beauty and wisdom of the porcelain children, but he found them trite and unimpressive, thought the collection below the mental caliber of his mother, having a graduate degree in gerontology. And yet, fifteen to twenty pieces sat crowded in the cabinet.

Before leaving for the evening, Eric walked through the house, surveyed the collections he needed to organize. There was *Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the*

Christian Soul, *Chicken Soup for the Teacher’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, and many more. There was a Jesus, Mary, and Joseph piece carved from olive wood, another sewn from felt, another crocheted in pastel colors lying near a rustic manger built long ago by hand, and still another of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph resting in a pueblo. There were plush, cuddly animals from the world of endangered animals and fragile wild places—an elephant, a panda, a snow leopard, a sloth, and a ferret.

The collections continued throughout the house, and Eric grew weary with the magnitude of things. Each collection had a central locale but then spilled into other rooms. Her place was crawling with things, which made sense to Eric as it had been hers for over forty years, and he knew she disliked throwing anything away. There were mountains of collections and mountains of singularities making up each collection. The mountains did not communicate their meaning, their method of touching her heart, the reason they found a place in his mother’s home. Eric could not understand her collection of God’s eyes, bear figurines, cat figurines, pig figurines, the multitude of angels.

Did she have any idea of the depth of her collections? Any memory of particular pieces she owned? She must have grown desensitized to the impact of new ownership, Eric thought, each addition being thought of as simply

one more piece. It wasn’t possible that she continued to derive any pleasure in more, having reached the maximum return on her investment. Was it possible, he wondered, that she intentionally buried herself in her collections? That her discomfort with and fear of people, including family members, was so great that she built a wall of things to hide behind?

Eric quickly realized the organizational plan was shortsighted, that he



Louise became the owner of a second precious porcelain child with teardrop eyes. It was a girl holding an old-fashioned lantern, the phrase “Let your heart lead the way” printed on the base. Though different from the first, the characteristics were similar: soft pastels, oversized head, mournful eyes, and an inspirational saying. The first one joined by the second, they became a collection



and his siblings had an inaccurate measure of the depth of his mother’s things. It was not possible to fit everything in one room. Better to put each collection together wherever he found it. He would need to use every room to do so. More important was the need to ignore the growing sensation that his mother spent her final years loving nothing but trinkets, that her only thoughts and connections were with the things that now surrounded him.

of precious porcelain children with teardrop eyes endlessly proclaiming things of the heart. Being a collection, it grew under Louise’s care. A precious porcelain child with teardrop eyes endlessly proclaiming “Sharing begins in the heart,” a precious porcelain child with teardrop eyes endlessly proclaiming “My heart belongs to you,” and among the many more, a precious porcelain child with teardrop eyes endlessly proclaiming “You make my heart glow.”

Louise displayed her collection in a curio cabinet of ornate pine construction with eight glass shelves and glass doors to protect the precious porcelain children. She continued to add more figurines, each one with a heart string connected directly to hers. Over a few short years, she filled the cabinet and the porcelain broke through the confines of the pine box to cover standalone shelves, tables, bathroom wardrobes. It reached a point when the number of children was unimportant and too great to track, and she no longer knew how many precious porcelain children with teardrop eyes endlessly proclaiming things of the heart she owned.

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There was so much stuff in Eric's mother's home that he envisioned her slowly being consumed by her collections, buried up to her knees, her waist, her neck, and finally suffocating on a multitude of things. He thought of Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*, slowly being engulfed by the earth with nothing but a parcel of her things and an unresponsive husband to get her through each day. He suspected that like Winnie, his mother believed her collections foretold happy days; each item in her worldly collections was a bit of sunshine radiating goodness, gentleness, and love. But as the cabinets overflowed onto shelves, tables, and wardrobes, his mother, like Winnie and her pile of sand, became dwarfed by their abundance, each piece,

each collection burying her bit by bit without the expected happiness.

As Eric organized his mother's collections, as he saw her buried in her consumption, he lost sight of the person behind each piece sitting in the collections. It became increasingly difficult for him to see or understand his mother, something he had long been attempting. He knew that she was more than her possessions, but they were all he had left of her, all that remained to make sense of her pain, her loneliness, her suffering, her death.

Eric emptied the Precious Moments cabinet, placed each figurine on a table, and walked through the other rooms, collecting the figurines that his mother could not fit in the cabinet. He added them to the table and looked at the sprawl. A crowded table holding precious porcelain children endlessly proclaiming things of the heart yet she was incapable of expressing what was in her heart. Shrouded in porcelain she preferred the accumulation of sayings of the heart over the openness and vulnerability of her own heart. As if thinking about the heart, gazing upon precious porcelain children could provide the love she yearned for.

The same process, the same confusion and disillusionment accompanied each of his mother's collections. Piles of *Chicken Soup* books filled with supposed inspirational stories, yet she was not inspired, was not soothed or comforted; she found no path to elusive happiness, no

words to alleviate her ongoing desolation. Each statue of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph told of love made flesh, but if she had a love inside of her, she failed in the expression of it, hid it behind her collections.

Each plush, cuddly animal toy had a tag explaining how they had dwindled so drastically and the kind of help they needed to ensure their survival. But his mother offered nothing as helpful for Eric, nothing to communicate

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From her chair she could see the sconces Eric made in grade school, the Father's Day letter he made from balsa wood, his first pine wood derby car, his bronze medal from his debating years. And the same with each of his siblings' creations adorning her walls, covering tables and mantels. Louise did not see these as collections, although she knew Eric considered them



how he could have reached her prior to her death, how he could have rescued her from her self-imposed prison. He grew angry with her dedication and commitment to these endangered animals and her inability to offer the same to her family. Similarly, he grew frustrated that she had continually refused his offers of care and companionship, refused to share the truth as she went through her own troubles.

so, and as such, admonished her to get rid of them. She saw them as a history of her family, as a reminder of their shared activities, pains, and joys. They recorded each step along her children's path from creative and sensitive boys and girls to the loving and well-meaning men and women they became. But mostly they stood as evidence that she loved and had been loved.

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Eric had experience as a collector and knew the distancing and isolation involved in the process. With the first money he earned as a child, he started his record collection by purchasing three LPs. He hadn't even considered buying just one. A person doesn't own an album, he had thought, they own a record collection. And when he sold his record collection upon turning forty, he had amassed over 1,200 albums, a

impressive antique radio collection. He knew the draw and pleasure, and maybe even the sickness, of collecting and finding a worthwhile addition, of watching the accumulation.

But Eric had been downsizing and decluttering for years. He lived in an apartment free of any bric-a-brac, almost free of collections. He had shown his mother pictures of his apartment. She had found it too stark for comfort.



quantity his mother had not attained in any of her collections. Same story with his books. When he sold off his collection, it still contained the first books of bible stories for children, his collection of easy readers, as well as his collection of international authors in English translation, to the tune of nearly 3,000 books. Around the same time he sold off his corkscrew collection, beer coaster collection, and small yet

A few paintings on the walls, a flower vase, a candle holder. *It's like you don't have any money*, she told him. She asked him why he lived in such a sad setting, but he didn't find it sad, didn't find the lack of objects a valid reason to mourn. It gave him room to think, to be quiet and undisturbed, to be free of the allure of consumption. And most importantly, it gave him room to see who he was undefined by the stuff he owned.

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Louise nurtured her collector spirit from a young age. It was not intentional, wasn't something she planned. It was simply family. Her father was a collector of the whiskey bottles he emptied. Louise observed him return each night with a new and full bottle. After he consumed the contents alone in his recliner, he would line the empty bottle against a wall and forbade Louise and her mother to disturb his growing collection. Louise was intrigued by the growth, how one turned to ten, to twenty, to too many to count. She admired her father's dedication to drink and his forest of bottles. She saw him ease into his evenings and mistook his behavior for self-care, for dedication, for the proper way to relate to family.

Her mother was distant and indifferent, unable to express love and concern for her daughter. Louise inherited her mother's belief that people could not be relied upon, that they would always fall short, that if there was ever a semblance of reciprocity it would be insufficient to combat a hostile world. Comfort could only be found alone at the kitchen sink, in front of the stove, in the pile of Readers Digests, in threading a needle, in crocheting yet another doily. As Louise grew she began to search for items she could love, anything that spoke to the burning she felt inside, to

the unidentifiable yearning she was beginning to feel.

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Eric had been holding on to his 1918 *Webster's New International Dictionary* for many years. It held little monetary value with its frayed and faded cloth cover, cracked spine, missing letter tabs, and unwieldy eighteen pounds. Still, as a gift from his mother, the *Webster's* had a permanent spot on his bookshelf. At the time of the gift, the two were attempting to mend long established and painstakingly built fences between them. At an antique show they attended together, Eric spotted the *Webster's* among a collection of antique books. As a lover of words and texts, he saw something special in the old dictionary, some sort of permanence in language, an attempt to assign meaning to the world. They left the booth empty handed, and as they were eating lunch, Eric's mother excused herself to use the restroom. She returned and handed Eric the *Webster's* with no accompanying words or explanations. More than the book and its words, the gesture spoke of his mother's awareness of something deeper than the arguments and the conflicts. It meant she knew Eric better than he thought she did, that they could move on from the damage they had both done, and it was an acknowledgment that she lacked the words but not the will to make things right. The *Webster's* was more than

an object collecting dust; it contained the spirit and the determination of his mother, her unspoken acknowledgment that she could have done better, her love for her son.

Eric was aware that imbuing the *Webster's* with those qualities was nothing less than magical thinking and fit poorly in his view of material goods. Was it possible, he wondered, that each of the singularities in his mother's collections held the same qualities as the *Webster's*? That his mother was intimately and intricately tied up in each and every piece in her house? Was it possible that she remembered the acquisition of each item?

But no one piece and no entire collection helped Eric understand his mother. Instead, he saw a maze she had constructed around herself, a wall that kept him and others distant from her. What he saw was a choice she made to close herself off, to continue to offer very little access into her heart and her soul. What he saw was a sad woman who kept herself protected behind her things.

He spent the remainder of his time that day and the subsequent eight days sorting inanimate and empty objects, blind to their import. He organized the empty vases, the pens and pencils, the notebooks, animal toys, and so many other collections. The home was still bursting, but it was well arranged and it would be easy for his siblings to view and decide what to do next. In the end they would most likely break up her collections,

disperse them back into the world with their meanings and their comforts and their love. While his brothers and sisters might take large portions of her things, Eric would not take any. It was enough to have her gift of the *Webster's*.



On Eric's last visit a while back, he had taken all of Louise's empty flower vases to the thrift store, claiming she could never use all of them. She had let him do so to avoid angering him; simpler to let him think he was helping and then start her collection again once he was gone. But watching him remove the vases was painful. He didn't understand that the long green one once held a gift of flowers from her pastor, the tall bulbous one once held orchids from her next-door neighbor, and the square one once held carnations of many colors given by Eric's sister. When he loaded the fourth and final box into his car, she watched him drive away with her vases and wept.



Eric found his mother's oldest collection secreted away in her bedroom closet. Behind a pile of empty shoeboxes and a pile of grocery bags filled with paid utility bills was an old Coleman cooler. Inside was a single jewelry box, inside of which was a purple felt Chivas bag, inside of which was a Chantilly perfume box, inside of which was a single red sock. He remembered the sock from when he and his siblings used to play

general store. They would sneak the old sock, which at the time was not so well buried but instead simply sat in a dresser drawer. The siblings would empty the contents onto the floor: six buttons of varying sizes and colors, four wooden spools with varying amounts of thread, and one small tin soldier with a broken leg that prevented it from standing. As a young boy he found it a strange collection with no obvious explanation for being kept together in a sock. Still, they had fun with the objects,

As Eric pulled the sock from its nesting place, he thought of his mother as a young girl and wondered what sort of solace she received from such a mismatched collection. He wondered so many years. He laid the six buttons side by side on a table, placed the four spools in front of them, and finally laid the broken tin soldier at the head of the display. The collection was minimal compared to the other collections he was surrounded by, but it seemed to speak louder than all the others combined.



setting them on shelves and tables, and pretending to sell and buy each item. They eventually got caught one day by his mother who yelled at them for sneaking into her personal things. When the yelling was done and the tears dried, she told the children that the sock contained her earliest collections and held an especially precious spot in her heart, which did nothing to help Eric understand the importance she placed on the eleven strange objects.

Eric could not know the depth of her love for these trinkets, the dependence she had on them to offer solace and enjoyment, the connection they provided to her parents and her childhood, and the strength she developed living in a strange world. He would never be aware that towards the end of her days, she had often taken the sock out of hiding and placed the treasures in front of her just as Eric had done.

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Shortly before she died, Louise once again removed the red sock from safe keeping and emptied its contents on her desk—the buttons, the spools, the broken soldier. There were a lot of things, a lot of collections acquired since those eleven items: the precious porcelain children; the Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

something as simple as a button. The only way that could be possible was if she had nothing to begin with, if she was drifting alone on a wide open sea. And then to add another button, as if a second and a third would somehow compensate for the lack she had experienced.

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The first button was a breath of fresh air. Discarded on a sidewalk, its bright



pieces; the Chicken Soup for the Soul books; many more. But these items were the special ones. The collection began when she first realized that she was alone in the world. Despite having people around, she was alone.

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Eric envisioned his mother and the first button she held in her small hands, though he had no way of knowing which one it was. There must have been a powerful pull from her to see value in

red-and-white swirls spoke to her like an angel from on high. It was fairly smooth with a few nicks and chips, but to Louise it was perfect. Someone had made it, sewn it on a piece of clothing, and someone had admired the finished piece enough to wear it. They must have felt a great deal of grief upon losing that button. It brought a lot of joy to the young Louise: its history, the trace of others upon it, a piece of the world she could hold and call her own. She kept it in a sock, played with

it secretly, and thought it the most precious thing.

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He held the spools in his hand, rewrapped the dangling thread, wondered why she kept nearly empty spools for forty or fifty years. They were entirely useless, nothing but trash. As far as he knew, his mother never sewed, had no use for sewing thread. He couldn't imagine what games she could have created with the spools, what sentimentality could have been attached to items meant to be discarded.

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She had seen it when her mother purchased it, full of bright blue thread, and watched as the spool emptied while her mother sewed. It seemed to take forever, but one day it was empty, and Louise grabbed it while her mother was in the bathroom, and she never noticed it was missing when she returned. Louise dreamed of gifts she could have made from the now depleted thread. Each time she spun the spool in her hands she imagined a blue sundress for her mother, a blue shirt for her father. They would look so wonderful together.

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Eric picked up the broken solder. Even being an antique, it held no value in its current state. Yet his mother had found

some reason to hold on to it. Was it because of who had owned it before her? Did it have a history that was not evident by looking at it? Perhaps it came from Europe or belonged to a long distant relative. Whatever the reason, his mother had attributed value to the soldier outside its monetary nature.

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It had been her father's toy and it had always been broken. It was the only birthday gift he had ever given her. It was missing a leg, the paint was chipped and there were no longer any features painted on the face. But Louise found it the perfect gift and was so touched that her father thought of her on her birthday. Seventy-five years later she tried to stand it up and upon failing she gingerly placed it in the red sock along with her small collection of buttons and spools.

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Eric collected the sock's contents, gingerly replaced them in the sock. His mother's little parcel of things. He placed the sock in the Chantilly box, which he placed in the Chivas bag, then in the jewelry box. This he placed in the Coleman cooler, which he returned to the closet behind the empty shoeboxes and grocery bags filled with paid utility bills. He would leave it hidden for now. Like her heart, her yearnings, the path to her embrace. The lost moments between a mother and her son. ✿