

Old Junk

THE STACK OF BOXES INSIDE THE FRONT DOOR began to resemble a cardboard hula dancer. Brian made a grab for its waist, but the toe of his loafer caught in the shag carpet, and he fell to a knee and then his hip. Inadvertently he bumped the stack behind him, then quickly threw his arms over his head when it shifted, because you never knew what was in one of these things. Could be Styrofoam. Could be a set of encyclopedias. Boxes rained to the floor. When the cave-in ended, Brian looked as though he had had jumped into a pool of cartons. They floated topsy-turvy around him.

“Darn it, Dad!” It shouldn’t be this hard to visit. Brian sat amid the debris and waited to be acknowledged. Sunlight coursed into the living room from the kitchen window and draped his father’s shadow across the mess. Brian twisted his head to try to see him. “Look at this!”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry. You didn’t hurt anything.” His father returned to the kitchen.

Brian didn’t care whether the contents were priceless or breakable. He angrily shoved and kicked boxes aside and stood up. He swept his hands over his clothing to knock off the big pieces of debris from the carpet, then picked off hair from his black slacks that had belonged to the last homeowner’s cat. Brian lifted up a box to begin to rebuild the stacks, then dropped it. The heck with it. Dad wouldn’t even notice.

Norman was standing at the enamel kitchen table, books and papers and a pile of Post-it notepads nearly obliterating the green surface. He looked as though he might be watching a vertical tennis match as he quickly looked back and forth through his bifocals, first at some notes in his hands and then over the line at an open book on the table. A company of toy soldiers stood in loose formation in front of the book. Norman’s bobbing head accentuated his scrawny neck.

He was stubble-faced, and his beaten green T-shirt sagged below his Adam's apple. One shoulder strap of his wrinkled, paint-splattered overalls hung off his waist, and the other held them up.

"A person could get killed trying to get through all those boxes. No wonder the girls won't come over here." Instead, his sisters, Susie and Jean, complained about their father to Brian and drilled him for details.

"You're crabby," Norman said. "Lori must have the kids this weekend."

Brian's mouth stiffened. "If I'm crabby, it's because of the mess I have to get past every time I come in."

Norman didn't look up from his task of putting small Post-it notes on each of the toy soldiers.

Brian scowled. He took a turn around the kitchen, hands in pockets. The disarray mirrored his feelings. It wouldn't do to have it looking this way today. He began to putter. He took the full bag from the trash can, tied it, and dropped it carefully near the door. An unidentified liquid made finger-like tracks on the inside of the white plastic. Next he found a new bag and began to fill it with detritus from the counter. TV dinner boxes, bread wrappers with moldy heels in them, empty pork-and-bean cans, lids still attached by a nubbin. He saved scraping leftovers from plates and pans into the bag until last.

"You could take out the garbage at least."

"Huh?" Norman looked up. "Oh. I've been meaning to get to that."

"What happened to the housekeeper I hired? Why hasn't she cleaned this up?"

"I fired her."

"What? Why, for heaven's sake?"

"She broke a plate."

"Was it priceless or something?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"Hey." Norman stabbed Brian with his gaze, briefly but long enough that Brian looked away. It had always worked when Brian was sixteen, too, and it dredged up an old adolescent grudge about Norman's unfairness.

"Too much money anyway. A housekeeper. It shouldn't cost that much to wash a dish."

"Maybe she thought of it as battle pay."

"Maybe she wanted to buy a helmet."

Brian's shoulder's sagged in defeat. He couldn't keep his mouth from quirking in a half grin. He retreated to fight another day, as usual. "Those anything special?" Brian nodded at the small, painted figures on the table.

“Picked ’em up at a sale Thursday night. They ought to be worth something if I can find the missing piece.”

Some people played the lottery to strike it rich. Some invested in the stock market. A year ago, Norman Sorenson had started looking for his fortune at the bottom of a cardboard auction box marked miscellaneous. In pursuit of that goal, the house had become his staging area. Apart from dirty dishes, unopened mail, and car keys, every available surface in the kitchen was devoted to Norman’s big finds.

Depression glass was arranged on the counter next to the refrigerator. On another counter were cookie jars, all more than thirty years old. A flimsy office envelope box bent to the whim of an enormous pile of old silverware that resided in it. A serving cart held a menagerie of copper coffeepots. Apart from the silverware, each item was adorned by a Post-it with notations of item and value, plus the name of the reference book where Norman had found the information.

“You haven’t marked the silver,” Brian said.

“I need room to spread it out. I need to make a space.”

Brian glanced around the room. Not a single horizontal surface showed up beneath the collections. “I guess there’s always the floor,” Brian mumbled. At least it was controlled chaos. Kitchen and dining items stayed in the kitchen. Lamps, old paintings, and clocks in the living room. All the furniture was in the basement. Brian knew, because he’d helped to carry much of it down.

“You could sort them in the basement. On that walnut dining table we took down a few weeks ago.”

“Oh sure.”

Brian began to restack a jumbled pile of dirty dishes on the same space they had occupied and ran hot water in the sink. “Where’s the dish soap?” He looked on the counter, then dug in the cupboard underneath. Once he found a bottle, he squirted the tiny bit of remaining soap into the water.

“There a reason you’re doing my housework?” Norman asked.

Brian didn’t answer.

“The girls are coming over, aren’t they? You only worry about how the house looks if your sisters are coming.”

“I’m cleaning up so I don’t have to listen to them complain.”

“They haven’t been here in weeks, either of them. What’s going on?”

Brian looked at him, and he felt warmth invade his face. His lips parted to speak, but Norman cut him off.

“You told them about the attic, didn’t you? I asked you not to. Cripes, they think I’m nuts as it is.”

“Dad, I think you’re nuts!”

“Thanks, boy. Thanks a lot.”

“Dad. You sell the house, a perfectly nice house that you lived in for forty years, to buy this wreck. You put nearly all of your belongings in storage so you can have room in this house to fill it with the junk you buy, telling us you’re going to make a killing and get rich. Tell me you didn’t lose your retirement money somehow and now you’re trying to make it up. Are you gambling on the side? Trying to keep a woman somewhere? What? And then, last Monday I find you in the attic taking it apart piece by piece.”

“Sometimes these old houses have something valuable hidden behind the walls.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Look, Dad. This has to stop. Just tell me what’s going on, because it’s the only way I can help you. The girls are coming over because they had Phil draw up papers.”

“Why would they need Susie’s husband to draw up papers? Papers for what?”

“Psychiatric evaluation papers. They’re going to force you to see a shrink.”

“You’re in on this too? This evaluation?”

“Dad, maybe it’s a good idea.”

“Maybe it’s a good idea that you just head yourself out the door. I figured of all you kids, you’d understand.”

“But I don’t. Tell me what it is I’m supposed to understand.”

The refrigerator hummed in the silence that followed, and several clocks in the living room ticked disjointedly. With jerking motions, Norman picked up an antiques book and yanked through the pages. Brian mentally traveled the house and the contents that seemed to shroud his father, hiding him from his children.

The house was engorged with bric-a-brac. It was as if like items had been grouped and encouraged to breed. In the living room were walls of cardboard boxes with a single walking path from the front door that split near the kitchen. At the end of the right fork was a couch with one space reserved for a guest, normally Brian. Snuggled up against the couch was Norman’s recliner and side table, piled high with newspaper ads for auctions and the remote for the old RCA that faced the chair.

Norman slept in a double bed made single by a line of old radios on one side. The other bedroom was declared the music room and reserved for old sheet music and an upright piano with missing keys and scarred cabinet. It ought to be worth something. It all would, according to Norman. He watched *Antiques Road Show* from his recliner with a gleam of anticipation for the day he would appear on camera and be told his something-or-other was worth a hundred grand.

Until then, Brian and his two sisters endured their father's peculiarity and kept it secret from everyone outside the family. It wasn't the only thing Norman did that was odd, but Brian wasn't up to thinking about the attic today. He was already overwhelmed. His sisters were coming, and they were going to do something about Dad.

Brian went to the sink and stood before it, intending to wash dishes but unable to do anything but stare at the suds. When Norman dropped the book with a thud, Brian finally blinked and sighed. His eyes traveled to a glass vase displayed on a shelf installed in front of the window over the sink. Dust motes hovered above their comrades already resting on the vase's surface. The vase was a swirl of different colors, bright and fanciful. Brian's curiosity piqued. It had no post-it. A new addition and one of a kind. He picked up the vase and turned it over. Norman appeared at his elbow and plucked the vase from Brian's hand. He blew some dust from it and rubbed it against his T-shirt before carefully replacing the vase on the shelf.

"Leave that there," Norman said. He didn't immediately move away.

"That the moneymaker? I break it, I pay for it?" Norman didn't respond, and for a moment, Brian thought his father might be ill. His complexion looked pasty.

THE VASE WAS IN HER HANDS. Garish red, blues, and greens flowed in a river over the bulbous base to a trickle that teased its way under the gold-edged rim. Nell's hands were becoming wrinkled, and a few brown age spots dotted the back of them. Her fingers were still graceful but looked purposeful because of plain blunt nails. She rubbed her thumb against the smooth glass and tipped the bottom up.

"Is there a mark?" Norman asked his wife.

"Yes, but I don't recognize it."

"How much?"

"Fifty cents."

They grinned at each other then, as they stood in a damp, musty garage amid old dishes, endless piles of baby clothes, and eight-track tapes, the third garage sale stop on a blindly sunny Saturday morning.

"Think it's worth something?" Norman asked.

"Surely a million dollars."

It was their standing joke. Sometime or another they would hit the antique lottery with a garage sale find and show everybody. Never did they expect it happen.

"Well, better buy it, then. Did you see the flower pots over there? You were looking for flower pots."

Nell clutched the vase to her chest and followed him through the maze of tables in the familiarity of their comfortable silence. The rest of the morning meandered on, companionably and slowly. Eventually, they returned home, and Nell put the vase on a shelf in their bedroom to look at while they changed to go to Brian's for supper.

"Darn thing will keep me awake, it's so loud," Norman grouched good-naturedly.

Nell threw him a look, which was what Norman was after in the first place. If he had a dollar for all the ones she'd given him . . .

Then she fell abruptly, landing like a rag doll on the floor. He was at her side in a breath. By the time he lifted her into his arms, she was gone.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Norman's eyes came back to life and he looked at his son. "Miller glass. Made in 1849, England. One like it went for auction last year at Sotheby's for ten grand."

Brian's jaw went slack and he squinted. "Ten thousand dollars?"

"Your mother paid fifty cents for it at a garage sale."

"Dad . . . you did it!" A grin broke out on Brian's face, but his father remained sober.

"I thought of it, after I read about the Sotheby auction. I went to the storage unit and found the vase in the cedar chest. I put it there myself. Your mother bought it at the garage sale the day she dropped dead. After the funeral, I put it away. Couldn't look at it. But you're supposed to get over things, right? So I read about the vase and dug it out of storage. It made me laugh because that day we joked about it, that we got a million-dollar vase for fifty cents. Ten grand is as good as a million to us. But your mother wouldn't have parted with it, and I won't either.

"Your mother and me. We were going to start an antique store when we retired but didn't get around to it. We were going to call it Old Junk, mostly because that's what we thought we were ourselves. Castoffs. Too old to be good for anything. We never saw much of you kids; you were so busy, and we thought it would give us something to do. We never wanted to travel, just piddle away our weekends collecting this stuff then reselling it."

A sheen covered Norman's eyes, and he looked directly at Brian. "I sold the house because I couldn't stand to be in it, and none of you seemed to care if I kept it. This place was cheap and could hold everything I needed it to. You and the girls, you think I'm crazy, well then go ahead, but we wanted that store, your mother and me, and I'm go-

ing to do it. I've got enough inventory now. I can open as soon as I find a building."

Norman pushed Brian aside and dropped his hands into the dishwasher. He fished out a stained dishcloth with one corner unraveled and sloshed it against a plate. Brian blew out a breath, careful that it sounded measured and not like it was coming out over a washboard. He blinked until his eyes were clear of moisture. He was inches away from Norman, but he didn't reach out to him. Brian hardly remembered a time his father had touched him with anything more than an affectionate slap on the shoulder or bump with his elbow, once he had become a teenager. But then, Brian conceded, maybe he wouldn't have allowed it. So he didn't put his hand on Norman's back now, even though he wanted to. Instead he picked up a dishtowel and took the plate Norman had just rinsed under the tap.

It occurred to Brian that he and his sisters hadn't asked Norman about anything. Norman's obsession had begun over a year after their mother died, so surely it couldn't be because of that, they said to each other. They'd made their assumptions because they weren't sure Norman was upset about losing Nell, anyway. He was as stoic and distracted as he ever was. Absolutely normal. Brian felt a twist inside. Normal for a guy who never willingly spoke of or outwardly showed his feelings, but demonstrated them in other ways. . . . and Brian knew that.

"Dad."

Norman turned and then frowned. "What's wrong?"

Brian swallowed, lifted a hand, then dropped it back at his side. After a moment he spoke. "I could do the books, if you wanted. At your store."

The corner of Norman's mouth tugged up, and he nodded. "That's a fine idea. You're good with numbers." Norman handed him another plate. "But if you do the books, you should work in the place once in awhile, to get the feel for the business."

"Can I bring the kids when I have them?"

"Of course. Sure. But don't tell your sisters what the vase is worth. They'll think I'm crazy not to sell it."

"You want crazy? Jean bought herself a pig and has been walking it on a leash in her neighborhood."

Norman dropped the dishcloth in the water and looked at Brian. "A pig? A pig pig?"

"A pot-bellied pig. Her neighbors tried to sue her for having livestock in town. She had to hire Phil to get it all straightened out. I've got dirt on Susie, too."

"I'm not so worried about the attic anymore," Norman said, and his smile disintegrated into a fit of laughter that stopped short of a

sob. Brian blinked and looked away. The sun infused the Miller vase with light and laid a kaleidoscope pattern across their bare arms as they began to work again.

“It’s a pretty vase,” Brian said.

“Yes.” Norman looked hard at the vase. His hands stilled.

“Almost as pretty as Susie’s new tattoo. The one she doesn’t remember getting.” Brian nudged his father’s arm with his elbow.

CHERYL SEASE, a Des Moines resident and current English major at Grand View University, has been awarded the Swedenborg Foundation’s 2009 Bailey Prize for fiction. Each year the Bailey Prize is open to nominations by instructors of undergraduate and graduate students in the arts and sciences for nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. By offering this annual publishing prize, the Swedenborg Foundation furthers the traditional Swedenborgian connection with the arts and celebrates the Chrysalis’ Reader’s more than twenty years of publishing established and emerging writers. Cheryl’s short story was nominated by Dr. Paul Brooke, associate professor of English at Grand View University.