THE OLD MAN

Ruth Beyer

The small man, neatly dressed and compactly-put together, stood in front of the antique store window, gazing raptly at the display inside. Featured in the window against a garnet-colored velvet cloth was the most beautiful, intensely blue bowl he had ever seen. Although he knew practically nothing about antiques, in his quiet unassuming way he could recognize quality and artistic craftsmanship when he saw it, and this blue bowl was the embodiment of both. "Porcelain, probably, from some obscure Chinese dynasty," he thought, as he removed his thick, heavy, black-rimmed glasses and began to clean them. While he did so, he was amused once again, as he had been practically all his life, at how his field of vision blurred without glasses. That lovely blue bowl, so sharply crisp and severe in its simplicity, and the artfully arranged folds of garnet velvet faded into a melange of swimming blues and reds. The man, however, continued to be very precise and thorough in cleaning his glasses, and when he was finished and satisfied, he replaced them, then carefully refolded his breast-pocket handkerchief and replaced it. Instantly the graceful simplicity of the blue bowl was once again focused in front of him.

While he stood there on the deserted sidewalk absorbing the bowl's beauty for a final moment before continuing his homeward trek, he sensed rather than heard the loud and rough sound of young male voices. Their raucous cries seemed to hang and float in the air, blending with the dry, scraping sound of curled, brown leaves being blown about his feet by the chill autumn wind. Irritated in an abstract way at being interrupted in his pleasurable contemplation, he glanced down the street and saw he was being approached by a gang of laughing, loud-talking, boistrous adolescent boys. Nervously, the man smoothed his thin, straight brown hair against his head and stepped a little closer to the store window. He cleared his throat softly and coughed quietly once or twice. As the boys approached he couldn't help looking at them again, and he noticed that in addition to their shoving and pushing and their harsh and ungraceful yelling, they were also tossing a football back and forth. He stiffened slightly and wished they would go away. As he turned his back to them and gazed once more at the serene and tranquil beauty of the bowl, he suddenly felt a sharp elbow
push him in the small of his back. He slowly turned to face the horde, intending to stare disapprovingly at them, when he discovered that they hadn’t even seen him. They had stopped momentarily and were lazily passing the football back and forth, accompanying their passes with crude earthy comments about each recipient. Their unleashed raw masculinity and unfettered animal-like spirits overwhelmed him with the essence of maleness, and they both fascinated and repelled the tidy little man. As their rough-housing became even more spirited, he was assaulted by their odor—a kind of ripe, sweaty body smell. He put his hand up to adjust his glasses while he looked up and down the street for the presence of some kind of authority, a policeman, maybe, or a store owner. The street was deserted. All he could see was the mass of swarming, brawling humanity which had engulfed him, and over their shoulders out in the middle of the street a small whirlwind of brown leaves which danced in a kind of formal counterpoint to the formless confusion on the sidewalk. He began to sweat and was annoyed at himself for such a reaction, but it was impossible in the crowd to discreetly remove that tell-tale response. He was caught up in their momentum, jostled and pummeled and shoved, while his whole body shrank from any physical contact with such an unruly group. Then with a particularly loud shout from someone, the football came through the air toward him and an arm reached out to take it, but in doing so, knocked off his glasses.

Full of rage and fury, he wanted to shout and yell as loud as the boys; he wanted to shove back and to push, but he couldn’t talk or move. He felt as if he couldn’t breathe, even though his chest was heaving and his heart pounding. Sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes. He was like a stick in the current of some wild river as he was propelled and thrust against one body and then another. He gasped and tried again to cry out against this indignity, but his voice was gone. As he tried to find some words of protest, he dimly heard a newly-bass voice next to him shouting, “Hey, guys, the old man lost his glasses. Anybody find them?” Jeers and catcalls turned to adolescent concern as the crowd parted, and in his panic, the man heard, “I didn’t see any glasses.” “Who lost glasses?” “What kind of glasses were they, mister?” He swallowed deeply several times, but still he couldn’t talk, although the panic was beginning to subside in his chest. Then in the shuffling and scraping of feet, a voice called,
“Here they are, or what’s left of ’em. Sure sorry you broke your glasses, mister.” And through the glaze of sweat, his myopic eyes saw in his outstretched hand some hazy broken black pieces and shreds of glass. While he stood, peering intently at his sweaty palm, the crowd of boys like a horde of noisy insects moved on down the street, and the rumpled, tousled little man stood alone in front of the exquisite blue bowl.

ON HOARDING THINGS

Elizabeth Tindall

I hoard things—like the little plastic bear I won at the fair, and the card that came with the first flowers I ever received, and even the old, tired Easter hat that I made from a paper plate and scraps of ribbon. There is also a drawer in my room jammed full of broken-clasped necklaces, rejected buttons, puzzling chunks of wood, an empty jar of something, and a lint remover that collects things on its own time. But besides these tangible lovelies, I hoard thoughts. Thoughts of people and things, places and events that have no physical evidences of ever being. Like pieces of broken bottle and shredded bits of paper, they litter my mind. And I remember my childhood with kaleidoscopic images from assorted angles in trees, atop roofs, and on the ground.

There was the frantic look on my mothers face the time our house caught on fire. And one Thanksgiving Day Sis broke her arm, and everyone rushed about in confusion until we got her to the hospital. I still remember my gloating vengeance when I greeted my brother at the door and said, “Our report cards came, and you flunked history, and I got all “A’s,” and Dad wants to see you.” All the pets we had, and all the times people threatened to sue us because some dumb kid put his leg in our dog’s mouth. Silly little flashbacks of times, times pleasant as if they had all come in the middle of June . . . and yet, I’m sure they did not. I guess that is the advantage of intelligent and discriminative hoarding: I can discard all the unpleasantries so that my past reads as I want it to. Sort of like a window, cleansed of all the dirt that ever touched it.