

Pieces

by Michael Hartford

I find my mother's pink Pyrex mixing bowl at the antique store on Fairview Avenue. It's in the hands of a fat woman in a blue down parka, and she's holding it upside down, squinting at the sticker on the bottom.

I stand by the box of sheet music from the twenties—bright three-color pictures of young lovers strolling in the park and spooning on porch swings, with titles like “A Moonlight Dance”, “Secret of Mine”, “At Sea in Your Eyes”—and wait. The bowl was part of a set my parents got for their wedding forty years ago, but the other pieces are long since lost or broken. Why this woman would want a lonely pink bowl ringed with little white flowers is beyond me; I'm sure she'll put it down and move on.

When she doesn't, I make my way over to the table of vintage cookware and pick up an aluminum cookie jar. It looks like one I used to have, also part of a scattered set, but the plastic lid is intact—mine had a long crack through the center, closed unevenly with Krazy Glue. June replaced it with a white porcelain jar from Dayton's when we got married, even though we never put anything in cookie jars. My mother had bought the aluminum jar for me at a yard sale when I moved into my first apartment; I kept Scotch tape and markers in it.

“How much is that?” I ask the fat woman.

She looks up and squints at me. “Twenty,” she says.

“Seems a little steep,” I say. “It's part of a set.”

She shrugs. “I'm painting my bathroom this color. It would look cute with soaps in it.”

God—soaps? In this woman's bathroom? I can picture my mother's pink Pyrex mixing bowl sitting on the tank of a matching pink toilet, filled with perfumed soap ducks and puppies, while this woman labors on the john. Her towels are probably pink, too, and fluffy, and have already absorbed the damp smells of her painted bathroom.

"It seems a little big to hold soaps," I say.

She shrugs again. "I have a lot of soap." And she moves back toward the racks of antique linens with my mother's bowl under her arm.

This isn't the first time I've had to buy things back. Last summer, June took three heavy boxes of books from the basement and sold them at the used bookstore on Ford Parkway. Most of them I was glad to see gone, actually—college textbooks, science fiction paperbacks from high school, Book of the Month selections that came because I hadn't mailed back the postcard in time with "do not send" checked. But some—and June couldn't have known without asking me, and she didn't—were very valuable.

Like my copy of "On the Road" with my notes from the summer I spent in Chicago. And my father's two volume history of the U.S. Cavalry. And the guide to apple orchards, its spine held together with silver duct tape, which had belonged to my mother's grandfather. These books didn't match the size and color of the books June allowed on the shelves in the living room, but they were still very valuable.

After I figured out what June had done I went to the bookstore every day for a month, waiting for my lost books to appear on the shelves. I bought back the Kerouac and the history books, along with some of the better science fiction and all of my Henry James paperbacks from college. I traded up on a few of the books, getting better

replacements for most of the James. But I never saw the sticky duct tape spine of "Northern Orchards and Gardens" again.

There's a box of old photographs near the linens. Many are from the days when photographs were rare and expensive, something to be taken seriously, and the men, women, and children in them have suitably dour expressions. But there are also some more recent pictures mixed in, casual snapshots of fishing trips, family picnics, presents under the Christmas tree surrounded by burnt orange and chocolate brown furniture so ugly it's beautiful. A few faces are recognizable from picture to picture, but there seem to be three or four families' snapshots jumbled together. None are of my family; I don't think June knows where I keep the nubby blue cloth albums that chronicle my childhood.

"This would be nice for soap," I say, holding up a wooden box. It held chocolates once, probably in the 1930s, and has paper decals of a little girl in a frilly white dress unwrapping a candy bar.

The fat woman looks up from a dusty lace table runner, rolls her eyes, and clutches my mother's Pyrex bowl a little tighter.

One of the photographs catches my eye. It's a black and white snapshot, from the '40s I'd guess, of an old woman holding a baby against a backdrop of hydrangeas and laundry. The woman has the sort of dour look that the people in old studio portraits wear, and she's starched stiff and straight, but the baby is giggling under tousled golden ringlets. It's like a missing-link fossil, the moment when formal portraits gave way to point-and-shoot casualness. I imagine the baby's father behind his new Brownie, lining up the picture with the boxy camera on his chest, saying, "Come on, Mom! Let's see a smile!" I flip through the box, hoping to find this old woman in her baptismal gown in the 1890s, her starched parents on either side of her serious little face.

I used to buy old pictures like this, and put them in cheap frames on my walls. "Acquiring ancestors," I called it, and I liked showing them off to my ironic friends from grad school. Sometimes I made up stories about them: prim Great Aunt Gertrude, who was a bootlegger during Prohibition; confirmed bachelor Uncle Adolf, who cruised the Elks and Odd-Fellows lodges; Cousin Emily, who lost her left nipple to frostbite while necking on a horse-drawn sleigh one winter. I liked adding a little scandal to these imaginary relations, since my own family tree of buttoned-up Methodists and gray-suited Rotarians offered no good scandals themselves.

But when I was alone, I looked at my wall of acquired ancestors and thought how sad it was that I owned them. Few of them had names anymore, and only a handful could be tied to a place by the studio's name stamped in gold on a corner. They had their portraits taken with an eye to posterity, to show their great-grandchildren what sturdy, upright citizens had preceded them. Instead they had been sold off for a few pennies, bought by the pound, and slandered by my prevarications, but still anonymous.

And I didn't want that sort of future for my mother's pink Pyrex mixing bowl. This woman would fill it with smelly soaps, balance it on her toilet tank, finally drop it on the tile floor or toss it out when she decides to paint her bathroom yellow in a few years. She'd never know that this was the perfect bowl for mixing brownie batter, that I used to sit on the couch with a plastic spatula and lick the chocolaty residue clean while the brownies baked, that even though I use my mother's bowl and my mother's recipe, my brownies are always too dry and dense. I wish I had my mother's spatula.

"I've seen some nice baskets for soaps," I say. "You can tie ribbons on the handles to match the bathroom, change the colors ever day."

"Look," the fat woman says, running her fingers through her lank yellow hair. "I like this bowl, it's the perfect size and color, I'm

buying it. Go find one of your own if you want.”

I toss the snapshot back in the box and walk over to the case of cameras. My friend Judy collects antique cameras—Instamatics, Brownies, Monroe Vest Pockets—and her birthday is coming up. The problem is, I don't know what kind of camera she doesn't have. She even has an old photo booth with a black velvet curtain, the kind that used to be in train stations and gave three poses for a nickel.

We went to a wedding this summer that had a photo booth, newer than Judy's. Dave and Samantha used to take portraits of themselves in a photo booth when Samantha came home from college, and they wanted their wedding guests to paste a portrait in their scrapbook. In our portrait, I have a dopy three-Martini, two-sherry, and one-Old-Fashioned-extra-cherry smile. June is glaring at me as if I've just made some rude sound; perhaps I had. When I pasted our picture into the scrapbook, I wrote beside it, “Congratulations—I hope it works out better for you than it has for me.” When I saw Samantha a couple weeks later at the grocery store, she laughed and said ours was the funniest picture in the book.

It was the first Jewish wedding June had been to, and only my third. When Dave and Samantha crushed the glass beneath their heels, June was a little dismayed. The rabbi, a middle-aged woman from New Jersey, pronounced, “May your love last as long as it takes you to put this glass back together, piece by piece, without a seam.”

If June and I had a crushed glass, I'm sure she'd make it into a project to reassemble it as quickly as possible. We would probably work in shifts—some projects aren't good for couples to do together. She would work all day, sorting pieces by size and snapping them into place; and at night, like faithful Penelope knitting Odysseus' burial shroud, I'd pop a few shards loose. Not so many that she'd

notice or be frustrated, only enough to keep the glass broken. Maybe I'd hide a few pieces if that wasn't cheating.

In the end, June would sweep the shards into a dustbin and buy a whole new set of glasses. She'd throw away my Flintstone's jelly glasses too, the ones in the back of the top cupboard covered with dust. After all, Fred's orange leopard skin toga is starting to chip.

"If you buy it for twenty," I say to the fat woman, "I'll give you twenty-five."

"No. I want it."

"Come on—that thing's not even worth ten without the other pieces."

"Then why do you want it so bad?"

"Sentiment," I say.

I broke the first piece of the set when I was seven and the bowls were thirteen. It was the middle piece—two were smaller, two larger—that I dropped while I was doing dishes. Before it happened, I knew something would go wrong. I didn't want to be doing the dishes, I wanted us to have an automatic dishwasher like all of my friends, and I was rushing to finish. The bowl wasn't dry—I had given it just a cursory swipe with the towel—and it slipped from my hands and split neatly in half on the floor.

From then on, the bowls rattled at me whenever they were stacked, as if they held a grudge against me for killing their brother. The two smaller bowls slid around inside the second biggest, threatening to chip the survivors. My mother started keeping them on top of the refrigerator and washed them herself. Still, two more bowls fell victim to accident and time over the next twenty five years.

The day after my mother died, June and I helped my father clean out the kitchen. He had spent the last two months with my mother at the hospital, doing jigsaw puzzles and eating the meals they brought for her, so there was a lot of food to purge. My father's approach to cooking involves a saucepan, a can of Hormel chili, and a bottle of Tabasco sauce, so he had no use for the Pyrex bowls.

"Do you want these?" he asked. He held the survivors—the smallest bowl, perfect for whisking eggs, and the largest, custom built for brownie batter.

"Of course," I said.

"No," said June. "We have mixing bowls."

"I want them," I said. "For brownies."

"You don't make brownies."

"Because I don't have the right bowls."

My father was digging noisily in the bottom cupboard and emerged with two square cake pans. The non-stick coating had peeled off so they looked like maps of an alien world's continents and archipelagos done in contrasting shades of gray. Black flecks of burnt brownies that had never washed off huddled in the corners.

"You'll need these, then," my father said. "And how about that electric beater?"

June stormed off to the living room and announced, "If those come into my house, something else leaves."

It was a cryptic and threatening remark. As it turned out, the

something that left was a crate of records from the basement, many warped and mildewed and not badly missed. I didn't even notice for a week.

I follow the fat woman into the parking lot behind the store. It snowed last night, and she moves slowly, as if testing with each step if the sidewalk will hold her weight. The bowl is wrapped in white tissue paper and tucked under her arm.

"Thirty," I say. "I'll give you thirty bucks for it."

The woman stops and stares at me. Her eyes are too small for her face.

"What the hell is your problem?" she asks. "They made thousands of these, there's probably a hundred in shops around here. Get one off eBay. This is mine."

"Thirty five."

"Forty and we'll talk."

Jesus. June couldn't have got more than five for it. The whole set, including the piece I broke almost thirty years ago, shouldn't sell for more than fifty. And I'm seriously considering paying forty dollars for one Pyrex mixing bowl.

I take a step closer, and the woman must think I'm going to snatch it because she steps back. Her foot comes down on a ridge of ice hidden under the snow, and she starts to fall, the bowl slipping free.

I could catch the bowl, or I could reach for her arm. Stupidly, I grab at the sleeve of her puffy coat. The fabric tears, I lose my footing, and we both tumble into the snow. The bowl lands on the ice, I land on the bowl, and she lands on my leg. I hear a cracking sound, but

I'm not sure if it's my ankle or the bowl.

"You asshole!" she yells. Her rump is planted firmly on my calf, which is twisted unnaturally, and she's making no effort to get up.

"Jesus," I whisper. I can't tell if the pain is in my ankle, leg, or hip. Sharp pieces of dirty ice and gravel are in my hand, but that doesn't hurt as much as whatever is broken under her bulk.

"You owe me!" she yells. Her mouth is close to my ear, and I can smell her milky, sour breath. Under that smell is something sweet—gardenias? grapefruit?—probably from her awful little soaps.

"Twenty bucks," I say, trying to pull myself free. My hand lands on the shattered bowl, still holding its shape in the tissue paper but loosely, tentatively, as if it will suddenly exhale and relax into a pile of dust.

"You said forty."

"I said thirty five. Get off me."

"You tore my coat, you moron. You owe me a coat."

And you broke my leg, I think, but say instead, "I'll pay for the coat."

"I should call the cops. You tried to steal my bowl!"

"Bullshit. I wasn't stealing anything."

She finally stands up with a rocking heave and a grunt. I reach up, but she doesn't offer me her hand. So I pull myself up and sit with my legs straight out. She has her hands folded under her armpits, waiting. I reach into my coat and take out my wallet and hand her all the cash inside it.

"You owe me twenty more," she says after she counts the cash.

"How much did I give you?"

"Fifty three."

"I thought we agreed on forty."

"And the coat."

"Thirty three for the coat?"

"New coat'll cost more than that."

"Jesus. It's hardly torn!"

"I'm calling the cops."

"OK. I'll get you twenty more."

She looks down at me and smiles. For a second I think she's going to kick me.

"Nah," she says. "You keep it. But I could still call the cops."

"Thanks," I say, but I don't mean it. I pick up the package with the remains of my mother's pink Pyrex bowl and set it on my lap. It rattles, like the accusatory noise it used to make with its lost brothers.

"Asshole," she says as she limps away, just loudly enough for me to hear.

The package feels lighter than it should. I won't unwrap it until I

get home. And I will love it for as long as it takes me to put it back together, piece by piece.

