

The Objects of Our Lives

Installment 9

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We say “things” are not important, it is the people and experiences of our lives that make it rich. But is that always true? This is the question we put to Guild writers, asking them to craft a story—fiction or nonfiction, prose or poetry—about an everyday object that represents an



Photo by Jim Tegman

important part of their life. The project was inspired by a *Harvard Gazette* essay by Leslie Jamison (read it [here](#)).

We are overjoyed by the number of writers who participated. Rather than creating one large document, we are serializing these pieces. Several pieces will be posted each week for our readers to savor and contemplate.

“From moms to dads...how could “The Objects of Our Lives” be complete without these items reminding us of our fathers?”

Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director

Green Ceramic Ashtray. Circa 1950. Judy Catterton.

It's hard to picture my father without a pipe in his mouth or tap-tap-taping it into his green ceramic ashtray. Even after my mother consigned him to the basement to smoke, he still walked around upstairs, his pipe securely gripped between his teeth. He'd mastered the art of shifting a tooth-indented pipe stem from one side of his mouth to the other without using his hands. Sometimes his pipe functioned as a prop, an extension of his arm as he gestured to make a point.



Dad's wardrobe was riddled with small holes where ashes had fallen. His hugs smelled of cherry tobacco. His smiles exposed his charred lower teeth.

My dad's ashtray now sits on a shelf in my storeroom—seen only when I search out a serving platter or look for some little-used cleaning product. When I see it there, I picture my father in his club chair reading one of his favorite Zane Grey westerns, the ashtray beside him, his pipe perched at the ready on its rim. Or I hear his raspy voice as he calls me over to show me how to make an army of stick figures from pipe cleaners, while he uses them to scrape ash residue from a pipe bowl into his ashtray.

This ashtray is neither attractive nor useful. But it was so much a part of my dad that throwing it out would feel like casting off the last vestige of his very existence.

Video Cassette Recorder. Circa 1982. Shelley Kahn.

Our father left us scores of movies
He painstakingly recorded on a video cassette
and later a DVD recorder.
He catalogued every one for posterity in alphabetical order.
All the favorites from my childhood were included there.
We forever will remember watching them with him on
every uncomfortable couch we ever had,
including the plaid one in our garage-turned-family-room at
the old house,
and the circular 80s pastel tweed in my parents' Florida
retirement home.

Though we of the younger generation preferred to “run
around,”
this was his favorite way to spend time with each of us.
He knew most of the screenplays by heart:
Meet Me in St. Louis; Singing in the Rain,
The Music Man; A Star is Born; Hello Dolly;
White Christmas (though we were Jewish);
Funny Girl; Lovers and Other Strangers (though I was 10 years old);
The Out of Towners (Set in New York City, though we lived in the DC area for many
years past).

Even *The Wizard of Oz* was included,
Though it was broadcast every year on television for decades.
Judy Garland still clicks her shining ruby slippers
in our saddest pandemic moments,
Calling us all back to our now randomly empty homes.
Back to where our father's detailed listing rests permanently on a special shelf,
together with the obsolete Video Cassettes and DVDs I will never purge
even when the last DVD player I own is gone.



Cotton Sweater. 2013. Willie Schatz.

Do you want it? my mother asks. Of course not, I respond indignantly. What will I do with a decades-old white cotton sweater with seriously outdated plaid cross-stitch patterns and staid color schemes only someone born in the generation preceding mine could love? Further, its white is quite dirty, its elbows have thinned, it has been stretched, pulled, occasionally pilled, and outlived its rightful owner. Worse, the Large will dwarf this Medium body.



What I've done is wear it. Then, now, and likely until this object of our affection outlives this now-rightful owner.

Because it was my father's.

Because I know it is too long and threadbare and misshapen. Because my unconscious mind knows me better than my conscious mind does. Because I didn't then and don't now want to disappoint him. (Trust me; he'll know.) Because giving it away would have been surrendering a part of us a part of me somehow knew I would want to keep. Because having it out of my sight, not knowing where it went or how it feels or who's wearing it would wear on me.

I've combed cyberspace for a Medium in the same pattern. None exist. In retrospect, I'm ecstatic. Because none should.