

The Objects of Our Lives

Installment 8

March 8, 2021

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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.

“Would any installment of “The Objects of Our Lives” be complete without objects reminding us of our mothers?”

Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director

Bowling Pins. 1960s. Irene Fick.

I can't remember a time when Mom didn't bowl. After she died, I kept these tiny trophies from Holiday Lanes. The leagues played at night, so I had to imagine Mom gliding down the alley, propelling the ball with enough force to split apart the pins. Another strike. Mary Piraino does it again! I could picture Mom's team whooping it up, high-fiving each other. I conjured this scene each Thursday when she turned her back on the migraines, the melancholy, turned her back on us to morph into a Pioneer, a trail-blazer in a white shirt embroidered with the sponsor's name. I watched Mom leave home around seven, svelte in black stretch pants, hair high and lacquered, lips painted a deep coral, bowling bag stocked with her prized turquoise ball and matching shoes. Long after midnight, I'd hear the whir of the garage door as the family Ford crept into place. I would be under the covers, stomach sour with worry, wondering what Mom did after the games ended and the bar began serving gin and tonics. She must have looked in on me, but I don't recall that part. What I do remember is that all I wanted was a Mom who didn't have to bowl, didn't have to stay out late, a Mom who wore an apron and made cookies, a satisfied, cheerful Mom who didn't need the company of strangers or the thunder of exploding pins to feel whole.



The Elephant in the Room. 1953. Tom Hoyer.



In 1953, when we move into our new tract house at 815 Patterson Drive, this little red elephant is one of the few items we display in the family living room, along with a silver Chinese tea caddy and a reproduction of one of Millet's reaper paintings. At seven inches long, its size appeals to a second grader. Cast in metal, it also has a nice heft to it. I take to it immediately. I often stop to pick it up and feel its weight and its comforting shape, to admire its unique red enamel and its chipped ivory tusk when I am in the living room. Elephants, we know from childhood rhymes, are faithful one

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hundred percent. They have phenomenal memories, too. As the years go by, the elephant becomes a special friend, and we renew our connection whenever I visit home.

In the late 1990s I receive a small cardboard box in the mail. The elephant is inside. There is also a letter from my mother acknowledging my affinity for it and expressing her wish for me to have it. A few years later, I discover a snapshot of one-year-old me on my mother's lap with the elephant in the background, outlined against the shadow of a lampshade. So, it turns out he has been watching over me from the start, has been faithful one hundred percent.

My mother is gone now. The elephant and I remain to remember her.

The Christmas Cactus. 1995. Rich Parfitt.

It was 5 a.m. on December 19, 1995, when I got the hospice call. My mother had just passed away. Almost fifteen inches of snow had fallen overnight. The storm continued to rage as I began a treacherous four-hour drive from New Jersey to Connecticut. Funeral arrangements were complicated due to the forecast of another storm. Nothing was going right. Some family members wanted the funeral delayed until after the holiday. But the funeral parlor said the burial plot would be impossible to dig if we waited. It was one of the most trying times of my life.



Before heading back to New Jersey, I donated my mother's clothes to a local parish. Pastor Susan thanked me and invited me into the church. Inside was the most beautiful Christmas cactus I'd ever seen. Branches almost two feet long were exploding with blooms. Pastor Susan twisted off three small nubs and planted them rootless. She handed me the pot saying, "Give this a few years to grow into a mother plant, then give away a baby at Christmas—to remember your mother by."

Her kindness and touching suggestion felt like a powerful sun during that dark time. Years later, I try to continue the tradition of giving away a baby plant at Christmas. Not just in memory of my mother, but also in remembrance of how a simple act of kindness can mean so much.

The Music Box. 1965. Meg Ellacott.



It's a cold and cloudy day when I spot the charm my mom left me. It's as big and bold as she was, made of solid gold and as heavy as if there were lead inside. The charm is a miniature music box encrusted on top with four precious gemstones. Miraculously, the sixty-year-old music box still plays tinkling musical sounds when I pull the toggle. Closing my eyes, I can still hear the clanking of other charms against one another when Mom twisted her wrist. I can still hear her laughter, see the light in her eyes. It is the only thing I have left of my mother's vast jewelry collection. And, other than a few photos, it's the only thing I have left of her.

I remember how smart my mom was. I remember her smile. I remember how funny she was, how she loved the written word, theatre, music and art—all things creative and fine. Most of all I remember how brave she was battling both addiction and cancer.

Forty-five years ago, when someone said, "You're just like your mother," I remember rejecting the idea. Twenty years later, I realized I was a bit, at least slightly, like her, except, maybe for the bravery part. And now when I look at this tiny music box, I think what an honor it was to be compared to her at all, let alone 'being just like her.' Because finally, today, I think I just might be.

Waterford Lismore Bowl. 1989. Kim Burnett.

My mother longed for an elegant home for entertaining, with stylish furniture, hefty silver, crystal goblets and a table draped in Irish linen. What she got, and made the best of, was a cramped house in need of repair, a three-legged sofa propped on books, and dishes from the green stamp catalogue. I never missed what she missed, but I absorbed her disappointment and carried it like a weight into my adult life.

My bridal registry was rigidly traditional, and I gathered English china and Irish crystal with enthusiasm. I studied proper place settings. Our mahogany dining table sat twelve, and my husband and I threw elaborate dinners that went to the early hours of the morning.

My mother loved it all, which was, I see now, part of the point.

I craved abundance. I craved adulation. Mom, 19 years gone, was my applause meter. More than once she said, “You are living the life I wanted.” I took this as high praise.

Since her death I have slowly unbraided her wants from my wants.

I pull out a large, heavy crystal Waterford bowl. It was a gift, and I never quite knew what to do with it, so I displayed it on our dining table in a place of pride. I confess, I thought it expensive and therefore important. I look at it. Really look at it.

The bowl will go.

I never liked that bowl.

