

Beauty & The Dumpster by Meredith Sabini

“We can’t use these. They look like heirlooms!” Gina, a guest at my holiday gathering, holds up one of the elaborately embroidered napkins from the buffet table. “Where’d you get them?”

“Out of a dumpster. The tablecloth and those candleholders were in there, too.”

“You can’t be serious! Why would they be in a dumpster?” The shock in her voice carried across the room, and others looked up.

It’s common that women ask where something came from, especially if it’s an attractive article of clothing or new addition to the house. But to name a dumpster as the source of anything, especially an object of beauty, is completely unexpected.

My explanation created an atmosphere of mystery. The tale was so unlikely that later my friends joked that perhaps I’d dreamed it.

The red napkin, tablecloth, and candlesticks all belonged to Mrs. Cybulski (not her real name), a widow who had lived down the street as long as I’d been in the neighborhood, about twenty years.

Except to water her yard, she didn’t go out much. And when she did, she stayed near the house, as if the tether fastening her to life had retracted, pulling her toward an eternal home.

One day, I noticed a full-size dumpster in front of her bungalow. I assumed it was for yard debris or trash from some renovation project. But soon strangers appeared. On my daily walk, I could see them scurrying around the property. A boy about twelve sat on the porch, looking morose. His expression evoked a twinge of anxiety in me that perhaps Mrs. Cy had died.

I called over haltingly, “Is she gone?”

“Yeah, she passed.” It was hard to tell whether he was upset at losing kin or just sulky at

having to help with an unpleasant task.

Through the large plate glass window I could see a woman balancing stemware between her fingers. A man about forty emerged from the back door, his arms piled high with what appeared to be bedding. I waited nearby to see if he was really going to deposit it in the dumpster.

Reluctant to intrude yet curious, I introduced myself. "Hi, I'm Meredith, a neighbor down the street. Sorry to hear about Mrs. Cybulski. Was she your grandmother?"

"Great aunt. Ninety-one. Had a good life," he said, and proceeded towards the dumpster, our conversation apparently over. He placed the neatly folded sheets and blankets down carefully, as if this were now the room in which they would be kept. I'd seen dumpsters full of discards of all kinds, but never one like this, packed like a trunk for an ocean voyage.

I stood fixed to the spot, bewildered by the odd juxtaposition of sudden death and business-like calm. The nephew soon appeared with the next batch, which he stacked on top of the previous one in the same perfunctory manner. Considering his lack of feeling, I figured I could peer into the dumpster without offending anyone. A wooden daybed, surrounded by perfectly decent household items, was pushed up against one side as if, at any moment, someone was going to recline there with a book for an afternoon read.

I dislike seeing things go to waste and the daybed was just the ticket for my guestroom; the old upholstery could easily be replaced. But asking to save something from the newly departed seemed crude. Was this merely social propriety, or a primordial instinct out of which taboos arise? If the nephew wasn't especially grieved by his aunt's death, perhaps he wouldn't be upset by my request to salvage a motley piece of furniture. Hesitantly, I ventured, "I wonder if I could offer to purchase that daybed from you, if you're planning to get rid of it?"

"No, but take it. You can have it." He marched past me without looking, without missing a beat. And I walked inside my first dumpster.

I've been to archaeological sites, know the sun-bleached whiteness of bone, the tea-colored stains left by earth. Here, no layers of soil obscured the find. To get to the daybed, I had only to move the piles of bedding. Her hall closet must now be empty, for here were ironed sheets, blankets, table linen, and the kind of embroidered and crocheted cloths that are found in old women's attics. When I saw these, my own mourning resumed.

Evenings at my grandmother's had been spent with the two of us huddled together on the divan, working needles of colored thread through squares of muslin, as she taught me how to give shape to the birds and flowers we ironed onto future kitchen towels. The few I have left are like gold to me. My grandmother and Mrs. Cy were of the same generation.

When our grandparents died, my brother and I had to deal with their belongings. It was the late '70s, a time when the perennial battle between spirit and matter was once again inflamed. Caving in to the pressure not to be attached to things or hold onto the past, we gave away too much and sold the rest for a song. Objects imbued with our ancestors' mana slipped through our fingers, going to strangers who cared not for their spirit but only their matter.

Into the dumpster were going similar artifacts of a lifetime. I didn't know Mrs. Cy well but this desecration had to stop. I had recently taken a religious vow of voluntary simplicity and was deeply committed to reducing my over-consumption by keeping existing goods in circulation and tending them with care. I could not stand by and watch while usable things went to molder in landfill. The nephew was headed in my direction with another load and I decided to press my luck.

"Are these linens and bedding going too? I would be glad to give you something for them as well." I pointed to a stack at the foot of the daybed.

"Oh, I guess you can have them. But I would make sure they get laundered."

Was it her death that contaminated them, or her life? Trying not to sound snide, I assured him I would wash everything, and began stacking the linens atop the daybed. Among them were an old-fashioned lace coverlet, a fine damask tablecloth with a dozen matching napkins in their original box, and pure cotton sheets with laundry tags at the corners. Laundering did not seem to be the issue.

After setting aside these things, I walked home to get my truck. When I came back, neither the man nor his son looked up, much less offered to help. I dragged out the daybed. Metal springs and horsehair filling made it heavy, but, with leverage, I managed to hoist it onto the flatbed. I decided that I would return for the rest after the relatives had left.

By five o'clock their car was gone. I pulled open the huge doors of the dumpster. I was stunned. It looked as if Mrs. Cy's entire household had been packed inside. Perched at the top was a faded green Chesterfield. I would not have been surprised to see Mrs. Cy's angry ghost hovering just above it.

Dressed for this venture in jeans and work boots, I approached with an apprehension that went beyond social propriety or legal concerns. What had happened to Carter when he first opened King Tut's tomb? Didn't he die soon thereafter?

The dumpster was full. Between strata of useless items, treasures emerged: several tiny Indian baskets, a lovely handmade cotton quilt in yellows and greens, a pair of tin folk-art wall sconces, an antique brass lamp with a fluted glass shade, circa 1930, a huge red tablecloth emblazoned with white stitching. Dainty tea towels appliquéd with delicate purple flowers. And kitchenware of every type, as if all the drawers had been simply turned upside down. Lawn clippings. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich in a ziplock bag, white bread still springy.

I lost track of time in this coffin-world. From the position of the sun, it looked to be early evening. I was tired. My hunting and gathering had been bountiful. My truck clanked with its cargo of fireplace tools, a chaise lounge, a Jade plant in a glazed Chinese pot.

The next morning I went back. As I climbed atop the pile, a planter box tipped over, spilling fine dark soil on Mrs. Cy's navy wool coat. Nature's pull to compost was strong; I paddled against its tide. A jar of strawberry jam fell out of a damp cardboard box and broke open, adding stickiness to the task. A peculiar magic associated with life's passing demonstrated itself, as contents that had been securely bound and held as long as their owner drew breath began to give way.

More treasures emerged from the massa confusa: red napkins to match the tablecloth

unearthed yesterday—the napkin Gina held up; a small cut-glass bowl on a sterling silver base; a garment bag containing fancy cotton dresses and petticoats dating to 1910 or 1915; a small box carved out of a walnut burl. Then, from a nondescript shopping bag, the most astonishing find: a satin cloche hat beaded with pearls and two antique silk shawls, one champagne-colored with long fringe, the other deep rose.

As I handled these, tears welled up at their beauty, and their abandonment. Were these items part of her wedding trousseau from the old country? By shoving them into the bag, had the nephew or his wife turned their backs on the family heritage, the way my mother and father also turned away from their old world backgrounds?

Mrs. Cy's shawls, pearl hat, and antique dresses would go into my grandmother's cedar chest alongside her dishtowels and my other grandma's black lace mantilla. The heritage of womanhood resides in heirlooms like these, saved for special occasions and stored where the bright light of day can't dull their radiance. The threads of these garments touch the flesh of one generation, then another, and the next, weaving life's warp and weft.

Mrs. Cybulski's things took up residence in my house. The tin sconces were hung above the fireplace, the quilt went on a wall to brighten a room. The brass lamp shed its years of oxidation, the burl walnut box drank up lemon oil. I did wash all the linens and blankets, not to rid them of any lingering odor of death, but to honor them with freshening. When this rite of renewal was completed, I lit the candles in the sconces and said a prayer for Mrs. Cy. I wished her well on her journey and thanked her for this unexpected beneficence. I apologized for disturbing her relatives and hoped she'd understand.

Certain events do resemble dreams. They are like a pebble that falls into a lake, the ripples slowly spreading until the entire body of water registers its impact. Or a bracken fern, tight and compact when it first pokes up above the ground, later uncurling to great width. And so it has been with my encounter with the dumpster parked down the block many years ago. It still ripples throughout my life like a dream unfolding in all directions around a central stalk.

My ancestors also were first-generation immigrants, who arrived in this country with only what they could carry. The little they came to own was theirs for a lifetime. Anything that broke was repaired; chairs and sofas re-covered, tables refinished. Objects did not come and go but remained stable, adding to the stability of the world. What I have of theirs contributes to the weight of my being.

It is common these days to lament how materialistic we have become, but I do not believe this is accurate. It seems to me that we have not yet begun to value matter. Much that is made today is not intended to last and cannot be repaired. Mana is unable to fill our possessions. Lacking substance, they cannot become proper vessels for spirit. We may ask where objects come from, but they no longer have stories to tell. They too have lost their roots. How, then, are we to leave tangible mementoes of ourselves when we go? What will be left to caress?