

Garbage Bags

by Hannah Messinger (September 2014)

There had been far too many days when the tarnished look of cable knit sweaters and coffee cup stains sickened me, almost to the point of throwing everything away. Sure, it'd be reckless, ridiculous, insane maybe – but the thing that kept me going was the maybe not. There was this part of me that wanted to tear down the world I created for myself – because what else is each of our worlds but the vision that we decided upon? For that matter, what are we but the spitting image of who we idealize?

And with that thought, I grabbed an empty trash bag, opening its gapping mouth wide with a gust of air. I reached for things I didn't remember keeping; things that had such a sentimental value they made me cringe. Sticky plastic cups from random places that give them out for free along road trip routes; sweatshirts long stained from the nights and days we spent painting our new apartment; chipped mugs that hadn't been washed since his mouth touched them months ago; hideous handbags my aunt insisted on buying and mailing me every Christmas she hadn't been able to fly in; key rings with no keys attached; woven baskets; musty comforters. And it didn't stop there, I didn't want it to stop there.

I moved to the kitchen, brushing the hair from my eyes and rolling my sleeves further up above my elbows, releasing another sigh from another plastic garbage bag. Something possessed me as I tossed away random utensils and dishes that seemed like a good idea when we bought them but ended up gathering dust. The broken dream of a casserole dish that should've been used last Thanksgiving when we ordered takeout Chinese instead; the darling salad bowl we picked out during our fitness craze that lasted barely three weeks. It was pointless, all pointless clutter and a gathering of memories that needed no remembering. It was as if a dark, gaping hole that fed on the gasps of our past was suddenly filled to the brim with whatever else was left of us.

My breathing became erratic as I realized I had been moving as fast as possible. Using the palm of my hand, I caught a drop of sweat on my temple and looked down at the filled bags at my feet. I let myself sit in front of them, assessing the damage. I knew in a moment I would dutifully unpack every one, carefully brushing off the contents and placing them neatly back on the shelves that were now empty. But it felt so good in that moment; it felt like a fresh start was possible. I opened the first bag I had filled and began removing each wondrously heavy item, feeling a twinge of guilt for having been so rash.

There was the gold ring we had found on the ground during our honeymoon in Sicily; the small clock I had seen in an antique store window in Syracuse and insisted we buy; the shirt I wore when we ran through the rain down streets in Cicero, soaking wet and laughing and assuring each other it was more than worth the looks that everyone gave us. And there was the bottle of nail polish I had used the day before you came home on the airplane from that business trip that took two weeks; the Stephen King book you lent me but I was too afraid to read, still; the wine glasses we drank from the first night you called me beautiful.

Hang it up, pick it up, dry it off, put it away. Remove the dust that had collected long enough ago to forget each item had ever existed or meant anything. I was hurting myself, I felt it deep in my gut as I opened the old letters and let out a small hiccup of sadness that quickly enveloped the triumphant room and made it the hospital we had been in.

Suddenly stark white and tantalizing, suddenly hopeful but impossible. And there I was standing with my back to the door drinking vending machine soda, so ignorant and unknowing and so naïve as to think that I was an exception, to think he was an exception and it'd all be okay and good and grand. The cold tile flat and the nurses rushing past and other people's emergencies and insurance papers and real and realization; and squeaking floors and thick air that made my tongue feel swollen and sick coughs and matter of fact and the doctor telling me he was gone and there I had been, outside the door and stupid. I owed it to him, to never forget and never let him wonder if I forgot, wherever he may be. To let him remember that the many lives I had lived with him were the only ones I kept and the only ones I knew were worth keeping.

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