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These Foolish Things

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These Foolish Things

Main Street, Harrisville was still quiet as George eagerly walked to the antique shop he owned. The aroma of the bakery made his stomach growl, but he did not stop for a morning treat. There was a time when George started every morning with a bear claw or a cinnamon bun, but he never took the time now.

George's shop was located between Jed's Bakery and Panache Place, the local beauty salon. A large wooden sign that his wife had carefully painted years ago hung over the door. Kinnee's Antique Emporium it announced in chipped and faded letters. George remembered how hard Martha labored over it. There was no peace in their house till it was finished. And now it hung ancient and worn with no one to fix it. The whole shop was worn. It looked out of place next to the other stores with their neat awnings, and carefully arranged window displays.

"I hate this stupid door," George said as he jiggled the key in the lock violently. The door was a daily struggle, he had to turn the key just right, and then apply just the right amount of pressure to get it open. He looked through the dusty window. He didn't see her, but he heard her humming, she was always humming.

"Martha, dear, I'm coming, don't you go anywhere." He put his weight into the heavy oak door, and forced it open. She was standing looking at an old china plate. She turned around when she heard him, and her eyes crinkled in the corners with her smile.

"Hello George, I'm so glad to see you."

"Oh Martha, I'm glad to see you too." His aged face seemed to glow at the sight of her.

She swayed over to him, as if she were dancing with an invisible partner. Martha twirled keeping her eyes on his. George had seen her do it hundreds of times, and each time he felt a nervous intensity in his stomach. It was the feeling of a child with a butterfly perched on his finger. He wondered how long before she flew. Yet, he loved to see her smile the way she always used to smile.

"Can we dance, George, I so want to dance."

"You look lovely, Martha," he reached up and touched her soft dark hair.

“That dress, I love that dress.” She had worn that dress the first time they had met. It was pale lilac, and he remembered how the moonlight had caught it. How he could not take his eyes off of her. He remembered when they finally danced, and how its lace felt beneath his fingers. She looked the same now. She was new, and nothing hard had ever happened to her. He loved her like this, free of suffering.

“Do you remember when we met, dear, in the park? It was divine.” She took her fresh hand and traced the wrinkles in his brow. “The band played the most charming music. I can almost hear it now.”

George almost forgot how old he was as he held her in his arms. He too, could hear the band playing the waltz music. There had been many people there, but it felt as if it was only them. She had been a possessing girl. She had taken control of his heart almost immediately. She was a great one for dancing. They had loved to dance the Charleston and the Continental, but he couldn’t do those anymore.

“Shouldn’t you open the store, darling?”

“Not yet, just a little longer.”

Just a little longer was all George ever wanted.

* * *

The day was nearly past before a customer made his way into the antique store. He was a middle-aged man in a pair of jeans and a navy sweat shirt. He looked around in distaste. The shop was certainly old, and dusty. It looked like an old warehouse with shelves that reached the ceiling and stretched for an eternity to the back of the building. Every shelf was filled with what appeared to be junk. Plates were piled in a precarious manner. Cobwebs were strung from one pile to another. He looked over at the old man who sat examining a jar of pickles.

“Do you have any antique furniture?” he asked to no avail.

George just continued caressing a glass sphere. The customer coughed loudly, still no response. Finally he went over and tapped the old man on the shoulder.

“Oh, can I help you?”

“Yes, please. I was wondering if you had any antique furniture?”

George looked around and laughed. It struck him funny that anyone could think that his store was lacking in anything.

“Course, I do. It’s all in the basement, but you’re free to take a look.”

George led the man to the back of the store. George didn’t venture down into the basement often. He struggled to open the door, which was in about as

bad shape as the one in the front. The customer gently pushed George over to the side, and firmly pulled on the door. It abruptly opened, the customer stared apprehensively into the darkness.

“Are there any lights, down there, sir?”

“Oh, sure, sure, just got to locate it.” He saw the pensive look on the customer’s face. “I know it looks a bit frightening down there. I haven’t been down there in quite awhile. I’m not very good with stairs anymore.” George moved his hand up the wall inside the stairwell and switched on the lights.

The customer helped George down the stairs. George was thankful. He hated asking people for help. A single light bulb hung from the center of the ceiling. It was hastily installed electricity, and wires hung loosely as they traveled up the wall. The basement was as crowded with merchandise as the upstairs. A musty smell nearly choked the customer. He coughed a little bit. There appeared to be a fortune’s worth of furniture surrounding him. It was a true shame it was being stored so carelessly. He really didn’t know much about antiques, but his mother was crazy about them. Her house was nearly as packed as the store. His wife was also fond of them. She was always saying how nice the house looked with his restored antiques. George gazed around the room and scratched his head. “Now finding them is the problem, but I know, I have some.”

He looked around. Finding the vanities would be the problem. George’s basement was organized, or, at least there was a semblance of order to it. All the picture frames were piled in one corner. Then George had some tables, pushed in another corner, with graying sheets carelessly thrown over them. He walked over to some furniture and began moving it around. He knew the vanities were in the basement. He just had to remember what corner they were in.

“I don’t get a lot of customers for furniture, I’m mainly into collectibles. I know I have some really nice ones. Uhhmm, here we go.” He pushed back a piano frame that Martha had loved because it was elaborately carved. Behind it were several vanities, complete with mirrors and cushioned benches.

“Oh these are nice, they’re in great shape,” the customer said in wonder. He went over and ran his hand over the dusty top of one, “How much is this one?” It was perfect for Nancy. It probably cost a fortune.

George looked at the vanity intently. He watched the customer as he ran his hand over its top. George could almost picture Martha doing the same thing. He could see her smiling at the customer just right. This was Martha’s job. George remembered when they bought the vanity.

It was raining, and the vendors were scurrying around throwing tarps over their precious goods. He tried to stop remembering. Remembering always got him into trouble when it came to making a sale.

“Well, um, I would, of course . . . You can see it is high quality.” George

stopped.

"Yes, I see that. Do you want an offer?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready to part with it," George was now intently studying his feet.

"Just tell me what you want for it."

"Well, it's a bit sentimental to me and, I'm just not sure . . ." he broke off because it sounded absurd to him. He knew it was absurd, but it wasn't the first time he found how.

"Fifty dollars." George blurted out. He couldn't believe it. He could almost hear Martha scolding him.

"Fifty dollars? Yeah, yeah, that sounds fine."

It was the first transaction George had made in months. It was only on rare occasions that he sold anything. He hated to part with the lamps, vases, penny banks, hat pins, china, and tea sets. They all reminded him of her and the times before they were just items for sale. They reminded him of a time when he felt more than emptiness within.

* * *

George waited around the shop hoping Martha would come back. It was well into the night before he decided to make his way home. It was a cold night, unlike the night when they had met. The stars had been beautiful, and the air had been warm. They were young. Life was carefree then. They had been surrounded by others just like them, people caught up in youth. The feeling that they were immortal, of course they were not. "We're not, are we Martha," he whispered as he locked the door and stepped off the stoop. Only the still night answered him. He knew he was alone.

It had been nearly five years since Martha had died. George still had not adjusted. He never really ate anything besides grilled cheese sandwiches and bowls of cereal. He often didn't go to bed, he just sat up most of the night and read. He missed her, still. Others had forgotten her, but he couldn't. When Martha came to him, the world was young and he was no longer an old man. He didn't know if he'd survive without her visits. George could never quite convince himself that they weren't real. He did not want to convince himself.

* * *

Joe didn't like his job assignment. The members of The Business Owners of Harrisville decided he should be the one to talk to George about his shop. So he found himself at the Antique Shop waiting a few moments for George

come to the door.

“Why hi, Joe, what brings you here? Need a gift for Sharon?” George said upon the sight of his friend.

“No, ‘fraid not. George, I wish this was a friendly visit.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Well, there is a small problem,” Joe shoved his fidgeting hands in his pockets, “George, the Business Owners sent me over here to talk to you. They are going to the City Council about the shape of your store.”

Joe looked around. It saddened him to see the shape of the shop. The store was never like this when Martha was alive. She took great pride in it. The shop had never been a huge money maker, but she loved it.

“What’s going to happen?”

“I don’t know, George. Harrisville is a quaint, little town, with quaint little shops. They just think you’re bad for business. Maggie thinks that she’s lost customers, because they’re too scared to walk past your shop. Rats, or some such nonsense. You and I both know it’s because she keeps raising her prices. I keep trying to get Sharon to go elsewhere to get her hair done.” Joe placed his hand on George’s shoulder. “Slap some paint on the outside. Clean the windows every once and a while. Just keep them happy.”

“I can’t afford that, Joe”

Joe felt irritated. Why did George insist on doing things the hard way?

“The reason you can’t afford it, is because you don’t sell anything, George. It’s a big joke around town.”

“Oh, is it? Well, you can just tell everyone, that I just made a sale this week. I sold a vanity to a fine young man.”

“To an unsuspecting newcomer, no doubt. I’ve been in here myself, and I’ve left empty handed not because I’ve wanted to. I’m your friend, George, and I don’t mean to be coming down on you hard. I should’ve come over here before this. I just never knew what to say. I know you miss, Martha, we all miss Martha. You have got to stop holding on to all these foolish things. She wouldn’t have wanted it, George.”

“Well, thanks for coming by.”

“George, they’re your friends too, but they mean business. But I know if you just make an effort, we’ll never hear about this again. I’ll do anything I can to help.”

“I know you will. Thanks.” George smiled weakly.

“I’ll even help you paint, old man.”

They both laughed. Joe invited George over for dinner before he left. George glanced around the shop. It was a mess. He never really took notice. Joe was right, it was a mess.

* * *

It was amid a row of ancient books when Martha came again. The musty smell of their pages lingered in the air. To George the store seemed an unworthy place for her. He had to wonder why he could only find her here. Here next to old novels and aging books of household remedies.

“Martha, why do you only come here, why don’t you visit the house?” George asked his wife gently.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried, George? You know it’s not easy coming to visit you!” Her face grew indignant.

“Darling, I’m sorry I upset you. I just don’t understand this whole thing! I mean am I crazy, or what?”

“George you have always been off your rocker.”

It was times like this that George felt certain that Martha could be no figment of his imagination. Whenever he remembered her he forgot her wicked side. He forgot how easily she could wrap him around her finger, until he found himself getting angry at her. “Mother warned me about that. But I wouldn’t listen to her. She didn’t trust you, George. I think you were entirely too handsome for her.” Martha’s anger, though quick to come, had never been long in staying.

“Well, your mother was right. I was a handsome devil.”

“Yeah, handsome pussycat is more like it.”

He loved it when she teased him. And she always teased him. It was though she never left as they stood there. As he looked at her young and beautiful, it was as if they had never grown old. Life had never gotten hard, and the miracle of young love had never grown mundane. It was before in sickness and in health. She had never died. There was still a life to be lead.

* * *

George took Joe’s news very seriously. He had to hold on to the shop; he couldn’t lose Martha again. He tried to make the place more welcoming, but he felt ill-fitted for the job. When he felt discouraged, he reminded himself, he had recently sold a vanity, of course he sold it far below cost. That customer’s mother now came into the store quite often.

“Hello, George,” she said.

“Nice seeing you, Lois. Can I help you find anything?” George asked his newly found customer.

“No, no, I’m just taking a look around.”

George looked back down at the Reader's Digest in his hand. He was disappointed. Lois came in quite often, but rarely bought anything.

"Oh, this is lovely, my, it's beautiful."

"It's just an old tin. My wife used to keep our crackers in it."

"Really, how interesting. I've been looking for something to keep my Oreos in. You know those packages just fall apart once they're opened. I suppose I could keep them in a baggy, but I don't know. Those aren't very personal," she glanced over at George. "What do you think?"

George looked at her and laughed. "She tops it all," he thought, "they're just cookies."

"I think that cookies should be kept in tins and not plastic bags," he stated with mock earnestness.

The wrinkles in her forehead grew more numerous as she raised her eyebrows. She reached up and smoothed her fine white hair. She looked around at the dust that surrounded her.

"This place is very dusty," she carefully proceeded, "I could help you clean up around here. I mean, if you'd like?"

"That would be nice, but I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"Oh, it would be no trouble. I love to clean, ask my son. Besides, it would give me something to do. It would keep me from watching Days of Our Lives. I've watched it forever, but it is simply getting dreadful. No, it wouldn't be any trouble."

George nearly laughed aloud, but he managed to control it. She looked at the tin in her hand. She knew it would be perfect for the cookies.

"Well," said George, "since you're going to help me clean, I'll let you have it for three bucks."

"Are you sure? Well, then I'll take it. I'll never have to eat a stale Oreo again."

George watched her as she left, tin in hand. He felt strangely content as she left with it. A smile crossed his face as he thought of Lois eating stale-free cookies.

* * *

Lois had been a great help to George. The shop had never been so clean and organized. She came in nearly every day. George had grown accustomed to having her around. Sometimes, she reminded him of Martha. She carried herself with the same gentleness that Martha had. Her hair was white like Martha's had grown. Of course, Lois's hair never seemed to stay put she was always brushing it back from her face. They played cards together. It reminded him of when

Martha invited people over to play Rook. But there were times with Lois that George never thought of Martha. When Lois's busy chatter filled the store, George was surprised at how often it made him laugh. She faced life with a simple optimism that he admired. Then there were the times she invited him to her neatly kept apartment, and they would feast on small meals only slightly more complicated than George's grilled cheese sandwiches. In her Wedgewood blue kitchen they would talk over all manner of topics, from movie stars to presidents. They often watched Wheel of Fortune together, and Lois would fervently buy vowels, and toss out consonants. It was in these moments, when an unconscious smile had crept upon his face, that George was subject to sudden feelings of guilt. He could not stop from wondering if Martha was waiting for him among the treasures of the past.

* * *

As much as George enjoyed Lois's company at the same time it frightened him. It frightened him that Martha was so rarely in his thoughts. His little shop had become little more than a shop. He looked around the store and could find less of Martha there. He felt as if he had sold pieces of her.

George walked about the store looking for a piece of his past. He found some old postcards that Martha had bought when they were on vacation. She always bought them, but never managed to send them to the people for whom they were intended. He chuckled as he read some of them.

"We've had a lifetime, George. We grew old together."

George's smile quickly faded. She was little more than a voice in his head now. They had grown old together. He had tried to forget that. He looked at a card from South Carolina. It was one of their first trips together. They had loved it, and had often gone back. Shortly after she got sick they made their last visit there. He remembered the way she helplessly clung to his arm as they walked slowly down the beach. She had cried that day in the hotel. George pushed the thought from his head.

"She's not you, Martha, she's just not you," he whispered shaking his head.

"Of course, she's not. You don't have to love her, George."

He felt he was losing her. He had done everything he was supposed to, and he was still losing her.

"Don't go, Martha." He said it loudly as if he were trying to call her from her hiding place.

"Enough, George, make a difference to people who are alive."

"I can't, Martha, not without you."

"You can – be the man I love, George, not the one I used to. You still

have life in front of you.”

George stood frozen thinking of the life in front of him. He once felt it held nothing for him, but gray hair, arthritis, and grilled cheese sandwiches. “There’s more to it than that, you’re right Martha, there’s more to it than that.” George put the post cards away. He was not ready to part with them. The shop was quiet and still, there was no young girl in a lace lilac dress. It was a quaint shop, crowded, but orderly. The wooden floor creaked as George made his way to the front window. The floor had always creaked. Lois said it gave the place character. George placed the open sign in the window, and grabbed a broom. Sweeping off the front stoop, he waited for his first customer of the day.