

Mementos

by Angie

*"Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff."*

- William Shakespeare

Father was alone, his birthday party over and his tunnel family back in their chambers for the evening.

He had been longing for some blessed quiet. He loved them all, but the party had been noisy, too noisy for an elderly person like himself. And tonight he wanted to be alone.

Another year, another 12 months of tunnel life. Birthdays seemed so inconsequential in the face of the joys, sorrows, William treats, Mary's admonitions – and the always present and so welcome, enfolding sense of community.

It was still relatively early in the evening. His family assumed that, at his age, he might prefer to retire early. For once, he was glad of that consideration. In truth, his habit of burning the midnight candle had not been quite broken. He had always enjoyed reading in the quiet hours of the night – more so in the old days, when his days were often interrupted by one crisis or another. Others now shouldered those responsibilities.

He certainly wasn't ready for sleep yet this night. He found himself, inevitably on this day, examining his life. And this year he would tackle something he had been postponing for more years than he cared to remember.

Father rose from his chair and shuffled behind the staircase which formed a wall of his sleeping chamber, to stand before a large wardrobe. He opened the door and rummaged around beneath the clothing, puffing a little at having to bend to such an acute angle.

He extracted a cardboard shoebox and carried it to his table, placing it carefully before his chair. Then he bent double again, cursing under his breath, to extract his metal wastebasket from under the table, where Vincent insisted it be so the old man wouldn't trip over it. Jacob placed it beside his chair and sat down with a slight wheeze and a deep sigh. No question about it, he was old. Very old, he forced himself to admit.

He regarded the box dispassionately. He thought he remembered most of the items it contained, although many had been there for a very long time – and some memories were painful.

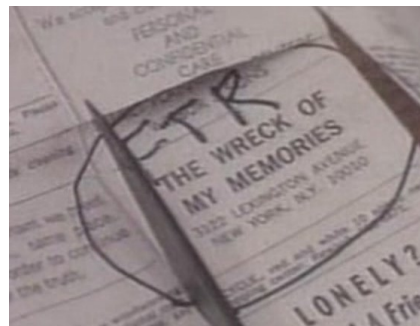
Removing the lid took all his willpower. Nevertheless, he did so and gazed inside. Then he dumped the contents carefully onto the table and spread them out with one hand, until they were all easily visible. He regarded them with mixed emotions.

The candlelight gleamed off plastic, so the first item he picked up was his badge from the Chittenden Research Institute. He looked at the image of his much, much, younger self.

Vincent had returned it. His son had said nothing – but had not needed to. Jacob disrespectfully flicked the edge of the card with his thumbnail, then dropped it into the wastebasket.



Next, he picked up the photo of himself and Margaret on their wedding day. That part of his life had been superseded by those seven days she had spent with him below before she died. The photo represented a closed chapter, and a painful one because of what had followed, so he dropped it into the basket too, following it quickly with their marriage license and the news clipping which Lou had sent to him.



It was best not to dwell on sad memories at his age. Those seven days were much more recent and much more pleasant to recall.



His next choice was a plastic bag. It contained a very old ball game ticket, a thin handkerchief, the key to a long-gone briefcase, a small box of matches, a cigar band, and a tiny folding pocket knife with a much-abused edge. These were the personal possessions found in his suit coat pocket and bagged by the police. They had arrested him in the office where he had found his best friend and lawyer, Alan Taft, murdered.

He had known deep despair then. He had lost a friend and thought he had lost Margaret too. There was nothing he cared to remember about that session, he decided. The bag joined the other items in the waste basket.

Jacob's eye caught a coat button and he picked it up, rolling it in his palm, fingering it's worn face. He recalled the well-dressed man he had once been. The button was broad woven leather, as all good coat buttons were in those long-ago days. That coat had kept him warm during those early winters in the tunnels, when there was had little else, certainly little they could use to generate heat. It had done hard service, often being used to protect him from rough cold seats and icy draughts.



Years later, after John was exiled and their circumstances had improved, the coat had been deconstructed and made into wool rugs and hats. He had found the button somewhere and recognized it. He now put it aside to give to their seamstress for her button collection. He was unable, in true tunnel fashion, to throw away something that might be useful.

Amazing how many memories that one chapter of his life had contributed to this box!

The next item made his eyes burn. It was a plastic bag containing one of the rags which had protected the baby Vincent from the cold. It seemed to be part of an old wool women's undershirt, of a type no longer worn even then. The infant had been well-wrapped, but in that bitter cold he would not have survived for long had Anna not found him. The rags had been too old and the impractical for much, even for the early tunnel community. Some had been discarded, but he had kept this one, against all advice, wanting to show it to Vincent when he was older.



As it happened, Vincent had been much older before Jacob remembered it. Vincent had

examined the piece of fabric, smelled it, and come to his own conclusions. He had found some solace in them, apparently, for which Father was grateful. So there was no need to keep this either. He dropped the bag into the wastebasket.

Next he picked up a pair of tiny, blue baby booties. He remembered Grace knitting them. She had carefully washed and unravelled an old sweater she had found in an alley. Knitting needles were a pair of bamboo chopsticks she had also found somewhere, cleaned and carved to give her enough of a point to knit with.

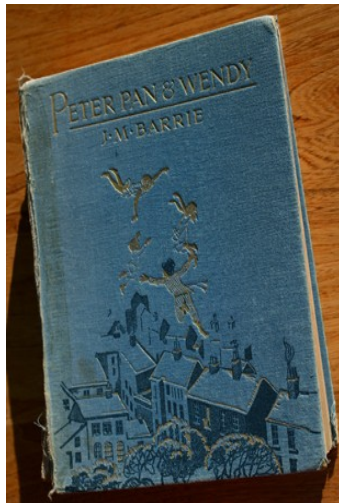
She had been positive she was carrying a boy, and was happy she had found blue wool, he remembered, even if it was rather dark.

Baby Devin had worn the booties for a few months, before outgrowing them. Even at such a tender age, Devin had been active and was always kicking off one or the other, necessitating a frantic search.

For a while, Vincent had worn them too, but his sharp toe nails had wreaked havoc on the yarn, and they had become tattered. He also had seemed to prefer them off, but somehow they had not been lost. Jacob had saved them in memory of Grace, but his sons were the real treasure. He dropped the tiny things into the basket too.

His hand touched a cherished item from the boyhoods of Devin and Vincent - a book they had both enjoyed to distraction, especially when they could coerce their father into reading it.

The blue cover was faded and torn, the spine barely holding together. It had many stains from grubby little fingers, whose owners had delighted in fingering the embossed illustration. The title was barely readable - but Jacob knew he could never forget it - "Peter Pan" by J M Barrie.



Neither son had tired of it until they reached about the age of 9, and for a while he had read it to both together. Their incessant "tick-tock", mimicking of the clock swallowed by the crocodile, along with muffled giggles, could be heard in their chamber long after they were supposed to be asleep.

He had always kept the book to hand, but somehow, years after it was last used, it had gotten damp. It was warped now - and it smelled musty. They had other copies of the book. This one served no purpose. He reverently placed it in the wastebasket.

"Rest in peace," he whispered, smiling at himself. Indeed, the book had seemed to have a life

of its own.

He picked up a largish bundle of pretty cards, all birthday cards. He didn't need to look inside them to know they were from the children, Catherine, Vincent, Mary, William, even Peter. Each was in its way distinctive. He knew why he had kept them - but realized he had never looked at them after those few days of prominent display in his chamber. They were an expression of love - but that love continued. Did he need this confirmation of years-ago love? No. He placed them carefully in the basket beside him.

He glanced over the items remaining and picked up a metal chess piece, a knight in armour. Brian had handed it to him, a couple of years after Vincent had given it to him, apparently.



The boy had outgrown his board games and felt it should be returned to the set it belonged to. He had not wanted to seem ungrateful to Vincent, so had given it to the patriarch. Father had understood, so had stored it away with other oddments in this box, waiting for an opportune moment to re-introduce it. And he had completely forgotten about it!

Why had Vincent given it to Brian, he wondered. It didn't matter anymore, he supposed.

He would not throw it away, though. He put it on top of a nearby book, a reminder to look for the chess set it belonged to. Then he remembered the mis-matched set of odd metal pieces, scrounged from who knew where. It had fascinated Mouse long ago, so much so that Vincent had given it to the tinker. Perhaps the knight belonged there. It certainly didn't belong to any set he and Vincent used regularly. Mouse never threw anything out, so he probably still had it in some forgotten corner. If Vincent recognized it, well, it was a long time ago. He would understand.

Jacob regarded the three items in front of him, memories flooding him as he picked up one of them, a ring. It was largish and lumpy, made from roughly fused gold. It had belonged to Lou, one the barber had always worn.

The children had been fascinated by it, and Lou had spun them a wild tale of the panning for gold in the Yukon. Lou had never left New York, Jacob knew, but read newspapers and cheap paperbacks as he waited for customers.



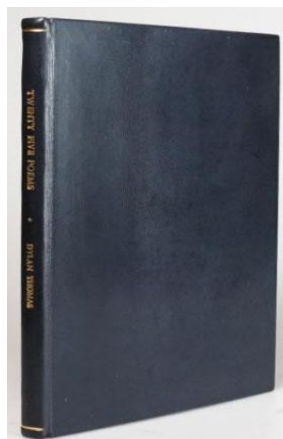
The ring had been found by Mouse – who else - at the bottom of a shallow pool in a deep cave far below a few years ago. It had been thrown there, and there was little doubt who had done so. They knew Paracelsus had killed Lou and decapitated him, because they had found the remains chained to a wall in a forgotten cavern some time later. They had only been able to guess the identity of the skeleton by the size of its underwear - and the fact that it was headless. The head had been found, after a search, in the cave that had been used by the mask maker, Tamara.

Lou had worn a ring on each hand, but the other had been a plain band. Perhaps Paracelsus had melted that one down. It had never been found. Mouse had brought this to him, anxious to avoid any upsets like that caused by the hoard of treasure they'd found in the old ship. Mouse hadn't realized whose it was – and Father had said nothing to anyone about it. It had been put into the box for safekeeping – then forgotten.

He sighed, then put the ring aside also. It should be interred with Lou's remains. He would see to it tomorrow.

Jacob regarded the penultimate item with distaste and pain. It was a battered book. Kipper had found it on the pavement in front of Catherine's apartment. He had followed Vincent to make sure he was all right as he raged out of the tunnels, then reported back to Father and handed over the book. This was what had caused Vincent to reduce his chamber contents to such disarray! He and Mary had set the room to rights as quickly as they could, knowing that Vincent would be further distressed by it, when he returned.

Dylan Thomas! He knew the poem Vincent had recited in his delirium. Catherine had told him.



That episode was best forgotten. Jacob dropped it into the waste basket with another deep sigh. Other copies had no such association.

The last item was an empty shoe bag, the kind that reputable shoe stores gave their

customers in the dim past. It had a name imprinted on it 'First Class Shoe Store'. It had been a popular place in his day, but he learned it had closed in the 60s.

Remarkably, the shop had been buried and forgotten until just a few years ago. It had been discovered by the owner's grandchildren, still full of 60's shoes of all types, still in their original boxes. It was hardly to be believed. Jacob shook his head, and spared a thought for the vagaries of fate.

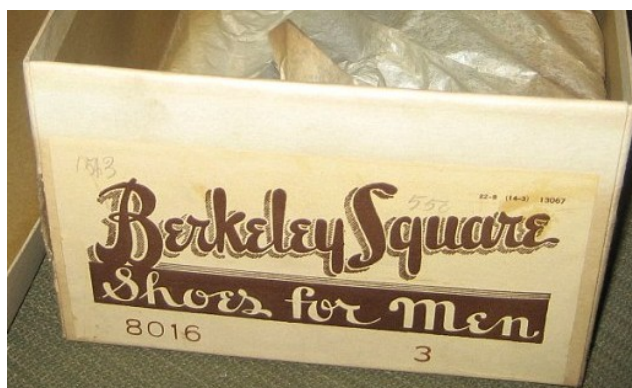


Reaching down, Jacob picked up the waste basket and carefully emptied the contents into the shoe bag. Then he placed it back in the shoe box, which was imprinted, "Berkley Square - Shoes for Men". A very popular shoe brand, he remembered.

The box brought back memories too. It was one of the few things he had carried in his valise, stuffed with whatever mementos he could take from the home he had lost, along with Margaret.

Only the badge, photo and marriage certificate had remained from that collection. The rest, personal grooming items and other oddments, were either in use, or long worn out and discarded. He still had the shoes, but they had been impractical for tunnel wear, and he had worn them only to go above when that was necessary. Now they sat in the bottom of his wardrobe gathering dust. He did not expect to have to go above again. He must remember to put them into their collective clothes storage. Someone else might be able to use them. Styles had changed - but they might be considered the height of "retro" fashion.

Jacob chuckled. He himself was decidedly "retro" - and it bothered him not at all.



Telling himself to stop wool-gathering and get on with it, Jacob untied the string from the shoe

bag, then folded it over. Then he closed the lid on the shoe box and tied it with the string and a sturdy knot.

He'd get one of the children to drop it down into the Abyss tomorrow. A suitable end to those memories, he thought.

Now he could look forward to his remaining time, knowing that there were no mementos to weigh him down.

He looked around the chamber. There were still many books to read, some that he would read again, and undoubtedly new ones would arrive, as they always had.

This library, he decided, contained the best memories - books. Books expanded the mind, instead of turning it inward. At his age, he needed that reminder. There were not many years left to him, but each one deserved to be precious and unburdened by the past.

With a smile and a sense of achievement, he rose from the chair and went to bed.

END