

## Shattered Glass

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My father's workroom was full of glass. It was stacked against the cinder block foundation of the basement between the furnace and his worktable. Rectangles and squares salvaged from old storm windows and plate-glass windows lined all the walls. Lugged home from demolition sites and neighborhood refuse, they were inventoried in his mind, ready to be selected for some future project.

His footprints still etched a trail in the sawdust that covered the basement floor. A neighbor's chair, its wobbly dowels glued and fastened between the clamps of a vise, looked like a modern sculpture defying gravity's impulse to topple. The radial arm saw was unplugged, the safety precaution he always took when leaving the workroom. Hanging on the wall behind the saw was the card "To Joe on your Retirement," signed by all his co-workers at the bank who chose to forego the usual gold watch that kept perfect time and gifted him instead with this shiny machine that made time fly. Lying next to the saw on the workbench were the plans for the birdhouse he made for me last Christmas and a carton of mechanical music boxes for his latest foray into woodworking, musical jewelry boxes.

I pictured him unplugging the thick black electrical cord to the saw, taking a soft rag and wiping the blade clean, the final check of the chair balanced in the vice before he pulled the cord on the single bulb illuminating the room. He had forty-eight hours left in his life, and he was on his way to the kitchen to make a ham sandwich.

He wasn't supposed to die. Certainly not on Valentine's day. A bad joke. A very bad joke. I was angry with him. It was funny the time he was hospitalized a few years earlier when he brought the big rubber dinosaur foot into the hospital and hid it under the sheet. I can still remember the aide doubled over with laughter at the side of his bed, the edge of the thin hospital blanket still clutched in her hand.

"He's goanna kill me with his tricks. I near to died at that ugly foot. Here comes the doctor. I'm goanna wait right here and see what happens."

But this was no one's idea of a joke. A pain in his side at dinner Sunday night. It persisted. The emergency room Monday morning.

"Nothing really wrong but we'll keep him in the emergency room for observation." All day and still nothing wrong.

The resident said, "We'll keep him overnight, just to make sure he is stable. He can go home in the morning."

An hour later, "No beds. You go home. We're putting him on the pediatric floor. He can entertain the children."

"Go home," he said to my mother and sister. "I'll see you in the morning."

The call came at 5:00 A.M.

"What do you mean he's dead?"

Silence.

“He can’t be dead. There was nothing wrong. He was with the children. He wasn’t even in intensive care. Who was with him? It must be a mistake.” But it wasn’t a mistake. No one knew what happened to his heart that night, only that it broke, unreservedly, unerringly, while children slept or didn’t sleep all around him.

Three months later, my sister and I were beginning the dreaded job of dismantling his workroom. Dreaded because the sheer number of screwdrivers and hammers and drills and wrenches and nails and paint cans lining the shelves in that room was overwhelming. Dreaded because this was where his spirit lived. His workroom was where he was most alive, plotting the next gift he would craft for one of us, rehearsing the next joke, the “gotcha” that would leave us laughing.

Where to start? What to give away? What to discard? The stacks of glass seemed the obvious place to begin. No one else would use it. No one else would be building glass-top-tables, or painstakingly measuring an obscure corner of a grandchild’s dorm room in order to craft the perfect bookcase or shelf to utilize that wasted space.

I would work on the glass, my sister on the tools. The pre-printed instructions for glass disposal as dictated by the town were tucked into the apron pocket of my rule-following mother. Each piece of glass was to be individually wrapped in doubled sheets of newspaper and the ends taped securely. Only then could they be stacked at the curb in piles no larger than two feet high.

And so we began.

Crawling under the workbench, I gingerly placed a hand on either end of the most accessible piece of glass, a two-foot square. I dragged it to the middle of the room and laid it down on overlapping pieces of newspaper. Pulling each end of the newspaper taut, I folded it over, taped it, carried it up the stairs and laid it tenderly at the curb. Over and over I wrapped a panel of glass, ran it up the basement stairs and deposited it at the curb, all the while thinking about my father. As the hours passed, guilt that began as a fumbling of my unsteady hands settled like a dead weight in the pit of my stomach. I hesitated. I sat on the floor in the sawdust, my back leaning against a leg of his workbench. I asked myself, “Would he be upset if he were here watching me throw his glass away?”

The desire to hold onto my father merged with the objects I believed were special to him. I felt as though I were abandoning him. Did he know my struggle? Still another part of me could picture him in his red, paint-splattered flannel shirt, standing in the doorway, probably half blocking it as I tried to maneuver past him with some oversized piece of glass. He would have thought that funny, a cold Rheingold in his hand as he teased me- “Put the damn glass out—let’s finish the job. What are you waiting for?”

He always had unique ways of getting my attention. Some planned, some unplanned. When I was nine years old, I had to be at school at 6:00 AM for some project that remains obscure to me. The streetlights that illuminated Brooklyn were still on in the early morning dark, and my father got up early and walked with me through the empty streets. He walked the whole six city blocks with one foot on the curb of the sidewalk and the other in the street, like some lame duck, all the while repeating some nonsense word like “gippycackaruba” that he created to make me laugh. Actually, I

walked in fear that I would meet up with a classmate or neighbor who would bear witness to this odd spectacle.

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That day, in his workroom, each piece of glass foretold his intention by its shape. Some were earmarked for a foyer table that would nestle alongside a stairway, with a rectangle of glass flanked by two squares of glass on either side. Some were destined for end tables or medicine cabinets. Some would go into picture frames he constructed with coved molding. Slender pieces would serve as powder room shelves held up by brass brackets.

After a few hours' work, I came upon a random piece of glass buried in the pile. I caught my breath. Cut into a hexagon, it was unlike any other slab of glass in the room. I knew immediately a lot of work had gone into that shape. It seemed special. He had probably taken it to a glass cutter; all six sides were so perfectly angled.

I stopped working, "Do you know what he planned to do with this?" I asked my sister as I held up the hexagon for her to see.

"No" she answered as she took a break from sorting the tools. "But you know how he was, always helping people out," she said. "It could have been for anyone in the neighborhood."

We continued to search our memories for some clue to the unusual shape, but neither of us could connect it to any person or place. Finally I wrapped it and carried it to the curb. However, a sense of unease preoccupied me. It was as though I was a child again and had done something wrong. By the time I finished wrapping the last piece of glass my unease had evolved into an overwhelming impulse to remove the hexagon from the rubbish. I needed it to be my "transitional object," the concrete symbol that would allow me to continue to hold onto my father even though I was turning his workroom into an empty tomb. The impulse sent me scurrying into the night to retrieve the piece of glass I had deemed "special."

"What are you doing?" my mother asked from the kitchen as I carted the hexagon back down the basement stairs. I told her.

She just shook her practical head. "That's silly," she said, "but if it makes you feel better, leave it in the basement."

Within a half hour, influenced by her no-nonsense attitude, I changed my mind and found my way to the curb once again with the hexagon. This went on three times—up the stairs, down the stairs, up the stairs, down the stairs—with the same piece of glass. Finally rationality took over. I left it reluctantly at the curb, and, exhausted, drove home.

It was after 10:00 p.m. when I parked the car in my driveway and entered the house. Although I was physically spent from the day's work, emotionally I was charged with thoughts of my father. I needed to spin down, to get my mind focused on something else. I needed to cry. I didn't know what I needed. My husband went up to bed around 11:00 p.m., and I stayed up to divert myself with a movie.

Around one in the morning, I was startled by a loud crash from the second floor. Thinking that my husband had fallen, I dashed out of the den, through the living room, through the hallway, and up the stairs, all the while calling, “Are you okay? Are you okay?” There was no answer. I opened the bedroom door whereupon my sleeping husband turned over in bed and said, “What are you yelling about?”

“I thought you fell. I heard a loud crash.”

“No, I’m fine, or at least I was until I heard you come bounding into the room.”

“You were probably dreaming,” he said groggily as he turned over and went back to sleep.

Shaken, I turned on lights all over the house. I knew what I had heard! I even went into the basement to see if something had fallen. Nothing was disturbed. Baffled, I returned to the den and resumed watching the movie. Perhaps I was dreaming, I thought.

It was close to 3:00 a.m. when I made my way upstairs for the night. Connected to the far side of the bedroom is another small room that serves as a dressing room/closet. I quietly made my way across the pitch-black bedroom and into the dressing room to retrieve my nightgown. I snapped on the wall switch. As the overhead fixture illuminated the room, I was stunned. There on the rug, in the middle of the room, was a shattered piece of glass.

I looked up. The glow from the three one-hundred-watt bulbs projecting from their sockets within the frame of the ceiling fixture was as nothing compared to the illumination filling me. I stared in awe at the shape of the fixture, now sans the glass covering—a perfect hexagon.

Time rolled back. Fifteen years earlier, changing the all-purpose laundry room next to my bedroom into a dressing room, I bought a new light fixture, one that would give me plenty of light. It had a plastic frame, stained to look like walnut and in the shape of a hexagon.

Disappointed after the electrician installed it because the opaque glass inserted over the three bulbs greatly diminished the light, I called my father to solve the problem. He came. Using the opaque glass of the hexagon as a template he measured and cut a clear piece of glass for my fixture. He installed it. I still wasn’t happy because the inner hardware of the fixture was exposed in all its ugliness, through the clear glass. Choosing beauty over utility, I decided to have my father reinstall the original piece of opaque glass that came with the fixture.

All these years later, I had found tucked away in his basement workroom, exactly what I asked him for. I heard myself laughing. I knew unbound joy as I felt my father’s presence. “You certainly got my attention this time,” I heard myself say as tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Who are you talking to now?” my husband, awakened for the second time, mumbled from the bed.

You wouldn’t believe, I thought but all I said was, “Everything’s fine. Everything’s just fine.”

I would wait till morning to tell him how in the darkest hour of the night, a shattered piece of glass made me whole again.