

Heirloom

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Wayne and Karen have lived in the same house 54 years. Two side streets off of Route 66, their small ranch home is settled along a suburban sprawl of similar dwellings. The road is quiet. Most of their neighbors are also older couples who have lived on Brookside Circle for decades. Yards are upkept by local boys looking to make some pocket change, as many of the men can no longer safely operate a lawn mower. Metallic pinwheels sparkle from patches of mulch, and seasonal wreaths hang from vinyl front doors. It is a decidedly blue collar neighborhood, and no one has gained enough to afford a porch. Last year, a wheelchair ramp was built over the cracking concrete steps of the home.

At a mere 900 square feet, one would assume the building only had enough room for the two adults. However, this small house raised four energetic young men into adulthood. In the 70s through the 80s, well worn bicycles packed the small garage. Plyboard ramps were constructed in the driveway and soccer games organized with neighbors in the street. In one room Chris and Jeff shared bunk beds, while Larry and Kevin shared in the other. As the oldest, Chris eventually got the room to himself while Jeff moved into a hastily constructed 'room' in the basement. Kevin and Larry continued to share until Chris moved out at 23. The remaining brothers continued to pass ownership of the spaces to each other until they all left home.

Wayne and Karen both worked. Wayne was drawn to manual jobs, spending much of his career in mechanic shops. Eventually, he landed at the Yankee Candle factory where he repaired machinery. Karen came and went from the medical field. While the boys were young, she worked as a phlebotomist at a local hospital. She spent some time as a stay at home mom before

returning to work at the Veterans Affairs hospital. Despite their clearly gendered jobs, their home roles switched. Wayne cooked and cleaned and kept the house running.

Somewhere in the middle of their busy lives, the clutter of life strewn about the house turned into a troubling collecting habit. Where report cards and homework once covered the tiny kitchen table, old newspapers and magazines began to collect dust. Jars of coins, old candy, and outdated prescriptions clustered onto the living room floor. Drugstore stuffed animals with tiny embroidered “Happy Valentines Day” and “Merry Christmas” patches found permanent homes on the backs of couches. Karen had never been a neat person, and as the boys moved out and more space became available, mountains of clutter grew. It was not a tidy habit, but it also wasn’t an outright filthy one either. While some garbage found its way unknowingly into piles and behind furniture, many of the heaps were simply collections of useless clutter. However, as the years dragged on, that clutter became unsalvageable. Paper began decomposing, and mice scurried into corners under stacks of unread books to make warm homes.

As more and more things began to pile up, movement in the home became difficult. What were already small rooms tightened from all angles. By no means a small man, Wayne kept his 6’, 300lb frame to his recliner in the living room. Injuries had forced him into retirement, while Karen had chosen to retire at age 60. The two recliners in the living room stayed clear so the couple could enjoy their time watching TV. He could make it to the bathroom and to his chair, so he was well. Karen, at a little under 5’ and meager 120 lbs, could easily navigate the passageways. However, as the years stretched on, there was no avoiding the fact that there was simply no more room in the house. Wayne began to see the effects of his 80 years. Being suddenly wheelchair bound, the house became nearly impossible for him to navigate. The bathroom became increasingly unreachable and entire rooms of the house were too crowded to

even enter. Two of the three bedrooms could only be walked into for about a foot before there was nowhere else to stand. Rooms no longer had sharp right angles as corners, but rather sloping piles that descended from floor to ceiling. However, Karen did not feel a need to stop collecting. Rather, she returned to her habit of gifting what she could no longer fit.

I: Consumables

When my dad returned from work that day, he set down a small pile of goods alongside his work bag. Counted among the pile was a large box of powder Emergen-C packets, various opened envelopes, and a plastic bulk container of heirloom tomatoes. Out of the six round spots, only two tomatoes remained. The brightness of the Emergen-C packets complimented the glowing red of the tomatoes. Upon inspection, the Emergen-C box had also been opened. My dad sighed and walked into the kitchen. I sat at the table examining the pile.

“Whatcha got here?” I asked.

“It's from Nana,” he replied. We shared a knowing look and astonished smiles.

His reply was enough of an answer. This was not the first heap of unrelated clutter that had found its way to us from his mom. Shuffling through the envelopes, I found a few genuinely important life insurance statements. They had made their way amongst less worthy papers. Empty envelopes with grocery lists hastily scrawled, half crumpled blank post it notes, and old receipts laid in front of me. It's always funny at first. *Why would she give these to us?* we'd say to each other. We'd chuckle at the absurdity of the situation. *She should be the one drinking this Emergen-C*, we joke. But when the smile falls, a somberness comes over me. *Why would she give us these?* I worry. *She should be the one drinking this Emergen-C?*

“It's just how she is, she's not going to eat them anyways” dad said, seeming to read my mind. There were few answers to her habits.

I threw the scrap papers in the trash and put the tomatoes in the fridge.

2: Collectables

What my Nana does with her days is a mystery. I asked her this Christmas what she spends her time doing. She stared out the window and rambled about reading books and taking trips to BJ's with Grandpa. Many of her answers to anything are hard to follow. She usually starts on the right track and ends up in a story that has absolutely nothing to do with the topic at hand. Her own description of her days left out any indication of time spent collecting.

Like most of her gifts, the mugs seemed to appear from amongst an endless collection of completely unpredictable junk. They were given to my brother and I on one of her brief visits. Clearly never taken out of their original cardboard boxes, the mugs were jaw dropping. Both were made from bulky ceramic and weighed heavily in our hands. My brother's depicted the long, shiny face of Sherlock Holmes. It had been thickly painted, green for his hat, red for his jacket, and pink for his rosy cheeks. It was comically large, almost 8 inches tall and 7 inches wide. Mr. Holmes' signature hat was hollowed in the center to make room for sipping. A pipe and magnifying glass stacked together to form a thick handle. The mug slyly smiled up at us.

My mug was slightly larger, as it depicted a face on each side. Holding the handle in my right hand, I was met with the ghostly white painted face of Cleopatra. Sharp black bangs framed her face, and a crown and necklace were painted with metallic gold. She barely smiled. Coiled around the handle on her side was a black snake. Turning the handle to my left hand, I first thought I was looking at a dated depiction of a Native American man. Dark features and black

hair made up his likeness. However, near his neck sat a large oval inscribed with “SPQR”. Julius Caesar, I guessed. His side of the handle featured an eagle and a small sword.

It wasn't clear which mug was meant for who. I'm an English major, so perhaps Sherlock was for me? But my brother has no interest in Ancient Rome. The haunting gazes of the glazed faces have overshadowed my memories of any reasoning that was made for the gifts. My brother chose to display his in his room. Mine was left deep on a shelf in the basement.

My parents were equally as shocked by the absurdity of the mugs. My dad had no answer for what would have led her to purchase, forget about, and inevitably give away the monstrosities. The mugs became a joke to us. We laughed about their haunting eyes and ridiculous size. Dad shook his head and made his own jokes. Nevertheless, a few weeks later he was returning from her house with more things.

“Nana sent this for you,” he said, placing down a small wooden object. It was a bright yellow chick that had clearly been painted by an unskilled hand. Two googly eyes shook on its face. Easter was about a month away.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Her neighbor made it, I think,” he said.

“And why would I want it?” I laughed. Something in his tone shifted and I could tell he was getting angry with me.

“Her neighbor made it and she thought of you,” he scolded. I got defensive.

“I don't have room for this. Its junk. It's not even like Nana made it herself.”

“You're being ungrateful. You can't just throw away things she gives you.”

I didn't dare say, *oh so now we're treasuring everything she gives us?*

I left the wooden chick on the table and stormed to my room.

3: Presents

On my 15th birthday, my Nana sent my dad home with a small package to give to me. It arrived with no wrapping, no ceremony. I found myself the proud owner of a Blue-Ray copy of 2009's drama hit *The Blind Side*. Not only had I seen it before, I hadn't particularly enjoyed it. Inside, there was no DVD, but a birthday card. She later explained that she couldn't find an envelope, and that the case had sufficed. I wasn't sure what to do with the case. It seemed rude to throw out something she had conveyed to me herself, but I couldn't think of any other use.

This Christmas I did get a card. Not *on* the day, but a week later. It came amongst another confusing stack of scrap paper after one of dad's visits to her. There were Christmas themed cards for my brother and I both containing \$50. Amongst the pile was a white card. On the front handwritten text read "you know you're getting old when" above two small holes. Instructions under the holes indicated I put my fingertips through the paper. As I did, I opened the card to the text "you look like this!". My fingertips had become the sagging breast of a cartoon naked woman. I wasn't sure if the card had been intended for me or my brother.

When I graduated high school, Nana gave me a heavy lump of plastic wrapped fabric.

"This is for you, I found it in the house, and it's probably valuable now" she told me. Speaking with her was often physically uncomfortable. She had to tilt her head up to see me, and she didn't always make eye contact. This was fine, as I rarely made eye contact either. When we hug hello and goodbye, the top of her head barely touches the bottom of my chin. She's so small that squeezing her feels dangerous.

Visible through one side of the clear plastic lump was a Certificate of Authenticity and a receipt for \$120 in 1997. I remember it said 1997 because that was the year my brother was born. I wouldn't be born for another 5 years. She would have had this for 23 years before it found its way to me. The package had clearly never been opened. It wasn't till after she left that I finally opened it. Inside was a large tapestry blanket. Four Dachshund dogs sat staring at me with coy expressions. Large text at the bottom declared "I Love Dachshunds". At the time, I did not love dachshunds. My Nana had owned a Dachshund before I was born, and had likely purchased the blanket while he was still alive. I feigned excitement as grandchildren often do, and left the blanket in the basement. She was in fact wrong, the blanket was selling on Ebay for \$20. It wasn't until almost six months later that the blanket found its way onto my bed. In need of insulation from both the harsh New England winter and poor window sealing, the dachshund blanket rarely left my side. Two years later, it came with me to college. When my boyfriend complained of its scratchy texture, I defended it.

"My Nana gave that to me. It's from 1997. It had never even been opened."

4: Family

This Christmas, when Nana came into the house, she came directly over to me. She had barely taken her coat off before she was slipping something heavy onto my finger and whispering into my ear like she was telling me a secret.

"That was my Father's," she whispered, not making eye contact with me. I was thrown off my guard.

"Oh. Oh, thank you," I hurried.

She left me there reeling as my mom went to take her coat.

On my right pointer finger sat a heavy gold signet ring. On a black stone was carved a strange logo of a question mark intersecting with the number 1. Above this was delicately engraved the word Intertel. Despite it clearly being a men's ring, it fit perfectly on my hand.

My first instinct was shamefully to doubt the legitimacy of the ring's previous ownership. Nane frequently mistold, confused, or obviously lied about family facts. I had been told my whole childhood that we had Native American heritage only for my father to give me sly head shakes when Nana wasn't looking. I quickly looked up Intertel. "Intertel is a high-IQ society founded in 1966, that is open to those who have scored at or above the 99th percentile on one of various standardized tests of intelligence" Wikipedia read. According to them, it was an even more exclusive chapter of the IQ club Mensa. I already knew Mensa to be somewhat of a sham, more of a boys club than anything else. I joined my mom and aunt where they chatted in the kitchen.

"Look what Nana just gave me," I said, showing off my adorned hand.

"What even is that?" My mom scoffed.

"She said it was her father's. I don't know though. I guess Intertel is some Mensa thing. I wonder if it's worth anything?"

"Oh," my mom said, suddenly very serious. "Yeah that makes sense, her dad was a really smart guy. He was a professor in something like physics. That's really special that she gave that to you. It might be one of the only things of his she still has."

I meekly shuffled to my room, away from the crowd. Why would she give this to me? Why not my dad or my brother? I asked my dad for his grandfather's name and I googled it to no avail. I kept the ring on for the rest of the evening, and spent more time chatting with her that day than ever before.

A few weeks later, I carefully asked my dad when her hoarding had gotten bad.

“It was never really clean in there, but it started to get worse when I moved out at 23.

Your uncles Kevin and Larry still lived there though. It was a hard couple of years for her. All of her family passed away in a span of about five years. Her parents and all my aunts and uncles.”

Just in a few years, those my Nana had known the longest, left this world. I couldn't even imagine what that must have been like. All I could picture was her house, bursting at the seams with junk.

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In June of 2022 I found myself finally down the hall of my Nana's house. I had never before ventured further than the living room. I was wearing an air filtration mask, protective glasses, and latex gloves. I stood at the threshold of the room my uncles had once lived in. I wasn't able to even step inside. The floor was piled up to my shins with debris, and a mountain of clutter taller than myself was growing on what I could only imagine was a bed. I was armed with a pack of black trash bags, and an industrial garbage loader was parked in the driveway.

My Grandpa's physical health had been worsening the past few months. It was clear the house was becoming a hazard to both him and my Nana. After many tense meetings between aunts and uncles, it was clear that something needed to be done and quickly. It was decided their house would be cleaned and my uncle and cousin would move into the spare rooms. My cousin is disabled and with two men who used walkers in the house, there needed to be a lot more room. It was agreed upon that the clean out would come with no warning. If Nana was there she would try to keep whatever she could. On the first day of the cleanout, Nana and Grandpa were taken

on a long BJ's run while we descended on the house. My brother, my dad, and two of my uncles started clearing out the space.

I spent that day sifting through mounds of junk. On the bed must have been over a hundred copies of National Geographic Magazine from over the years. In one corner a stack of unused purses piled almost to the ceiling. Books rotted on a shelf tucked behind the bed. I saved the ones that weren't too moldy in a big plastic bin. I sternly told the men in the other rooms of the house that they needed to give me any books they found in usable condition. I took my dad aside and told him I was deadly serious. He was not to get rid of her books. I put them all aside for my Nana to go through on her own.

Eventually, the brown carpet revealed itself to me. It wasn't until halfway through the day that I was told the room I was working in was the one where a few years prior my Grandpa's sister had been staying before she died. My dad only told me when I came across a large stack of handwritten genealogical notes shoved in a crowded dresser drawer. She had been tracing their family line back through the 1500s. Cursive writing filled up various scrap papers and cheap notebooks. Annotated books about Nova Scotia genealogy were uncovered in an adjacent drawer. I carefully organized them and set them aside into a small pile of things I planned on keeping for myself.

This was the greatest barrier to efficiently cleaning the house. You couldn't just scoop up large piles and throw them right away. In every room were small, valuable pieces that couldn't be trashed. Family photos, essential documents, and family heirlooms had been scattered to every corner. If anyone was to get a straight answer about the history of this family, it was going to have to be found here amongst mouse poop and mold.

When Nana and Grandpa finally arrived home, my dad asked me to keep them occupied outside. I resisted initially, already feeling uncomfortable about this day. I sat with them in mismatched lawn chairs and asked my Nana what she had been reading recently. I told her about some of the books I had found and wondered what she thought of them. My dad thanked me on the car ride home for keeping her distracted.

That night I confided in my mom how guilty I felt getting rid of all her stuff without her knowing. She reassured me that it needed to be done to keep everyone in the house healthy and safe.

“She's too old to change her habits,” my mom said. “But the rest of us can try to help her.”

I tried to accept this, and showed her the pile of heirlooms I had brought home with me.