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MY VINTAGE MEMORY

When I try to remember the first vintage thing I ever bought, my mind fills and clutters with images, shelf upon shelf, hanger upon hanger, of the many treasured things I have somehow inherited (from friends as well as family) and never paid a pretty penny for.

So many of these things — some pointedly op, some sleek-angled and shining, quaint and neat, or garish and mushroom-clad — remain tethered to a white-stringed tag of emotion. When I turn over the tag on each, I know that it will say something like: “burgeoning friendship”, “sheer covetousness” or “giddy excitement” because before I, or anyone, knew that the things we had long known and come to inherit would become “vintage”, they would simply be known as “hand-me-downs”, as connected to our memories and feelings as any single or repeated event in our lives.

My mother, on migration to the Antipodes from the small village of Taddington in England’s north, had inherited what remained of her mother’s best tea set. As a child, each momentous time that set was brought out, I would whisper a spell to keep its dainty encirclement of ivy leaves safe, until that glorious (and yet tragically sad) moment when the sound of each cup clinking as it kissed its pretty saucer would become mine.



While my mother lives on, that Colclough pattern tea set is long since gone and the fragments of it are scattered like my family across continents.

When I was not eyeing off her good china, you might have found me lying upon my mother’s bedspread examining her silver charm bracelet — replete with moving parts: a cat that foraged up and down through a garbage can, a sewing machine with a spinning wheel, a pair of snipping scissors, trumpeting elephant, opening book ...

Space on the thing was at a premium and most of its residents, which had been crafted at a time when big loved to be beautiful, jostled each other for space as a new one arrived each birthday or Christmas. A charm was an easy gift for a child to buy with their pocket money in the 1980s, but as production and taste by then had reduced the trinket to a suggestion of form rather than a detailed reproduction of it, I was never sure if the gifts I bought my mother really held any charm at all.

I was eight when Santa Claus brought me my own charm bracelet and the perfect cure for covetousness. By 14, I knew myself to be no jangling gypsy. The search for a self-constructed self had begun — a search that coincided with the realisation that I should stop asking questions which started with the cruelly sentimental, “When you die, can I have ... ?”

So, I was not particularly enamoured with the brass bird brooch my Aunt Dorothy spontaneously gave me around this time while cleaning out her jewellery box. The brooch had belonged to my Yorkshire grandmother. The pin and its tail were slightly bent and with its painted jewel-less spots it looked more like a child’s curiosity than a serious adornment.



That brooch would move house with me no less than 24 times before I began to see its red beady-eyed merit as something more than the relic of a grandmother I had never known (who had polished other people's treasures for a living, but didn't spend up big on her own).

The red-eyed swallow survived another two decades of being occasionally worn like a copper wallflower against a 60s palette: acknowledged but never completely enjoyed.

Until, that is, motherhood itself changed the brooch's significance for me. This was no startling moment where *Sometimes when we touch* started to play from behind some invisible curtain that, once pulled back, revealed the spirit of maternal evangelism burning secretly within me.

No—I started wearing the brooch because with motherhood came exhaustion, frugality, and a lack of spare time. With motherhood came the all-black or grey wardrobe and its drab demands for splashes of glimmering optimism in the form of a necklace, scarf or ... brooch!

I have three daughters now, and I wonder at what age exactly I should begin to watch them for signs that what I give them won't be appreciated until they can truly make it their own. And I wonder if they will think the same thing when the time comes to hand down that lovely wooden fox brooch they chose last year from the pop-up shop at the handmade markets.

And, how I would love to know how that brooch will be worn by my great-great granddaughter in a future as unknown as a distant land.

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