

My Drawer

I AM looking through the top drawer of my bedroom dresser this morning — something I almost never do. I have a reticence about examining these articles, which I don't quite understand; it's as though the Puritan side of me said it was a waste of time, if not faintly indecent. Since I have moved my socks to another drawer there is even less reason to visit these redundant objects. Six months go by without my doing any more than feeling around blindly for a cuff link. My top drawer is a *way station* in which I keep the miscellanea that I cannot bear to throw away just yet, but that I fully intend to, the moment things get out of hand. So far the drawer can take it. It is too early for triage. But this morning I have an urge to make an inventory of the drawer, in a last attempt to understand the symbolic underpinnings of my character.

In it I find a pair of 3-D movie glasses. A silver whistle. A combination lock in good repair but whose combination has long been lost. A strip of extra cuff material for the legs of my white linen suit — should I ever grow an inch or two I can sew it on. One plastic and one aluminum shoehorn. A button that says **BOYCOTT LETTUCE**. Keys to old houses and offices. My last pair of glasses before the prescription

changed — who can throw out a pair of eyeglasses? Two nail clippers. Cuff links. A pair of rusty unusable children's scissors. A windproof lighter I won at an amusement park; too bad I don't smoke. Oh, and lots more, much more. But before I go on, shouldn't I try to approach this mess more systematically — to categorize, to make generalizations?

One category that suggests itself is gifts I have no particular affection for, but am too superstitious to chuck out. (If you throw away a gift, something terrible will happen: the wastebasket will explode, or you'll never get another.) They include this pair of cloth finger puppets that I suppose were meant to give me endless hours of delight while sitting on my bed pretending to be Punch and Judy with myself. Because I work with children, people keep bringing me juvenile toys — magic sets, mazes with ball bearings, paddleballs — confusing the profession with the profession's clients. Over the years I have been given a whole collection of oddities that do not really amuse me or match my sense of perversity. Nothing is trickier than bringing someone a novelty gift, since each person's definition of cute or campy is such a private affair.

Now we come to my "jewelry." Most of these items wandered into my possession toward the middle of the sixties, during those few seconds in American history when it was considered progressive for men to wear medallions and layers of necklaces. In my top drawer I find an imitation-*elephant-tusk* necklace, a multicolored string of Amerindian beads, and a hodgepodge of what I can only call spiritual amulets — tangled-up chains and rings that are supposed to contain special powers or that symbolize the third eye. Usually these ornaments were given to me with the explanation that most men the donor knew would be too uptight to wear jewelry like this in public, but that I was free enough to be at peace with my feminine side. Little did

they know. Each and every one has landed in my top drawer, enough for me to open my own jewelry stall at a street fair.

Other mementos of hipper days include a large brown-velvet King's Road bow tie, a pack of moldering Bambu cigarette papers, and both DUMP LBJ and IMPEACH NIXON buttons. I find it hard to throw away political buttons — as hard as it was in those days actually to wear them. There is also a badge from a conference, with the words "Hi! I'm —" and my name on it. Toward the back of the drawer are my war medals: my high-school American history award, with its pea green / navy blue / red tricolor; my yellow-and-white-ribboned English award; the silver badge from the Fire Department for best fire-prevention essay. Glory days! They do cheer me up when I see them, though they are as useless now as the keys that no longer fit my door.

The keys belong to the category of things I kept to be *on the safe side*. For instance, an official bank card for cashing checks, no good to me now since I no longer go to that bank, but what if it were to fall into the wrong hands? I find also a wristwatch case with midnight-blue lining that seemed too pretty to part with, and that would make an excellent box for safety pins or — whatever. Oh, and a suede-looking drawstring purse that once held a bottle of overpriced shampoo (I seem particularly susceptible to these packages for luxury items). I realize I'm fooling myself when I say I will someday find a use for these containers. How can I when I ignore them for months at a time, and forget that they're there? They live a hidden life in the back street of my consciousness. Perhaps the drawer's purpose is to house objects that arouse only half-digested desires never fantasized all the way through. That is why I must not look into it too often. These are secret fantasies even I am not supposed to understand.

Even more than desire, these objects seem to have the

power of arousing guilt; that is, they have fixed me with the hypnotizing promise not to throw them away. I find myself protecting them with an uneasy conscience, like someone whom I caused to be crippled and who now has the upper hand. I suppose if I were to examine the derivations of each of these keepsakes, many would call up some road not taken, some rejection of possibility. Or perhaps they are secretly connected to each other by surrealist logic, like the objects in a Joseph Cornell box, and if I were to lay them out on top of the dresser I could put together the story of my subconscious mind.

When I consider my peculiar, fitful relation to the drawer as a whole, I have to think back to the original top drawer: the one in my parents' house when I was seven and eight years old. There was nothing I liked better than to sneak into their bedroom when everyone else was out of the house, and to approach their large, dark mahogany dresser, with its altar top composed of the round reversible mirror, the wedding photograph, the stray hair-curlers, and the Chinese black-lacquered music box where my mother kept her Woolworth jewelry. Then, taking my time, I would pull open the three-sectioned top drawer by its brass handles. What was so fascinating about rifling through their drawer? I used to find nothing very unusual: some objects of obscure masculine power, like my father's leather traveling case, a shaving brush, a pair of suspenders, a wallet with photos of us, the children. Then I would go over to my mother's side of the drawer, and visit her bloomers and her gypsy scarves. I would pick up each item and smell the perfume: Arabia! Then back to my father's side, for some clues into his stolid, remote, Stakhanovite personality. In the middle section was no-man's-land, with elastic bands, garters, pipe cleaners. Once, it seems to me, I found a deck of pornographic playing cards. Am I imagining this? Isn't this rather what I kept

looking for and *not* finding? I know I came across the rumored box of prophylactics, which my older brother had assured me would be there. Yet these balloons did not thrill me much, or as much as they might have if I had only been seeking "dirty things." I was searching for, not clarification, but a mystery, the mystery of masculine and feminine. Certainly I was looking for the tools of sexuality that held together the household, but this went further than mere rude instruments; it included everything that made my mother so different from my father, and that still enabled them to share the same life, as they shared this drawer. The drawer recorded without explanation the ordinariness of this miracle that had given birth to me.

And now I live alone — Oedipal child that I am. The contradictions of my top drawer stem from my own idiosyncrasies and not from any uneasy cohabitation of two creatures of the opposite sex. To pry through their things, I see now, was a kind of premasturbation. Where better to indulge than in the bedroom of one's parents? Even now I must be affected by that old taboo against self-abuse — in going through drawers, at least — which explains why I go through my own top drawer with embarrassed haste.

My drawer has its secrets as well. To honor the old prying and bring it down to earth, so to speak, I keep a box of prophylactics. Also, toward the back, I am ashamed to admit, are a few of those ads handed to me in the street for massage parlors: "Beautiful Girls — Complete Privacy — One Price. . . . Tahitia — Gives You Just What You Expect!" and an awful color photo of two women in a bubble bath with a grinning curly-headed man. These are also kept just in case, to be on the safe side. Here is a squashed-up tube of diaphragm cream, with just enough in it for one more go. Kay must have left it behind, as she did this frayed pair of panties. Do you know we almost moved in together,

before we broke up for the very last time? And finally, the most forbidden object of all: the five-and-ten I.D. heart with Kay's name on it. Since I have forbidden myself to brood about her anymore, I must open and shut the drawer very quickly to skip seeing it, and inevitably I do catch sight of that heart-shaped button, the sort that high-school sweethearts wear. She gave it to me in our first year, and thinking I didn't love her enough, she accused me of being ashamed to wear it in front of my friends. She was right, of course — I have always been wary about advertising my heart on my sleeve, whether political or amorous. Kay was right, too, that in the beginning I did not love her enough. And now that I do, and she loves me not, I faithfully continue to wear her pin, in my top drawer. It has the place of honor in that reliquary, in my museum of useless and obsolete things that stand ready to testify at any moment to all that is never lost.