

At Grandmother's Table

By M.J. Andersen



My maternal grandmother was a champion accumulator, legendary in our South Dakota town for her impact at auctions and thrift sales, and in our family for never dropping by empty-handed. A few years ago, it fell to my Aunt Mary and me to ready her possessions for sale—a job anyone who had seen Grandma Tait's house would have shuddered to contemplate.

I set aside three weeks that November and flew home to do nothing but sort and box. But by Thanksgiving Day, when Aunt Mary and I had hoped to be done, mountains remained.

By the middle of the first week we had already turned punchy. Just opening drawers and looking into closets made me feel faint. Many of the possessions I doubt Grandma herself had seen in years. Our work became an archaeology of the soul, the layers of things testifying to Grandma Tait's unruly aspirations and changing enthusiasms. She painted pictures with oils, collected stamps and coins. She kept everything. We sorted through paper dolls, hats and hatboxes, and enough vases to stock a florist's shop. I counted more than 60 throw pillows.

But Grandma's great love, as we had always known, was dishes. They were everywhere: in kitchen and bathroom cabinets, in the basement and the attic, under the beds. Fancy plates were stacked three deep on the dining-room plate rails.

One night, exhausted and stretched out on the living-room floor, I noticed a cabinet under the TV that we had overlooked. Inside was an entire set of Limoges. We laughed until we were tearful. Grandma's formal china, familiar from holiday dinners, was a Hutschenreuther set, beautiful violets on a white background. Where and when had she ever come up with this gold-rimmed Limoges with its pale-green flowers?

Most of the things in Grandma's house were destined for auction. To speed our work, Aunt Mary and I designated the large dining-room table the "maybe" table. Anything we might want to keep or give to relatives but were not sure about, we placed on the maybe table. That way, we would not stop to agonize over each thing. As the days passed, it became loaded with dishes. There were candy dishes and relish plates, handpainted hot-chocolate sets, Tom and Jerry mugs, a punch bowl, dessert plates decorated with fruit. There were flaming-red liqueur glasses brought home from Venice, and Delft pieces from the Dutch foreign-exchange student our family hosted when Mary was in high school.

There was Wedgwood, Roseville, Fostoria, and Nippon; cut glass and milk glass, Depression glass and etched glass. There were butter pats from the old set once used down at the Masonic lodge. (How did she get her hands on those?) And the Limoges.



As the accumulation grew, it became somewhat easier for us to release our darlings into the boxes bound for auction. What we contemplated keeping surpassed sense. Both of us already had dishes of our own. And as my father observed: How many plates can you eat from?

Still, in the process of sorting through Grandma's things, a self I scarcely recognized as mine began to emerge. Aunt Mary had always loved what she called "stuff," but I tended to panic when stuff crossed the threshold into clutter. I liked order; Grandma, a true daughter of the Victorians, thrived amid profusion. *Needing* so many dishes was not the point; the essence of her collection was exuberance, a pure unbounded delight in the things of this world.

I knew quite young that Grandma and I were decided opposites; we mixed as ill as bone china and Bakelite. Yet in those weeks of sorting, I felt free to draw near her, in a way I never could when our clashing personalities met. For the first time, I could experience the pleasure she had taken in what she used to call "my pretty things." I appreciated, too, her fierce need to fill her life, in a place where there was always too little going on to suit her, and where the starkness of the landscape disagreed so violently with her sensibility. She longed for culture and manners and social distinction. Perhaps she thought teacups with handpainted roses would force all these things to bloom.

As it came time for me to return east, I knew I would never see the like of this accumulation again, and that in some ways I would always mourn the dispersal of Grandma's heroic assemblage. There was a bid for immortality here that was as great, in its way, as the pyramids were in theirs. And who would honor it, I wondered, if her small, dispersed family did not?

Reader, I kept the Limoges.

I saved a few other things too: the periwinkle water glasses I remembered so well from Thanksgiving dinners; some small silver trays; a white creamer, German, with a calla lily on it.

Aunt Mary got a kick out of my belated succumbing to Grandma's things, though perhaps all along, she expected it—knew this lust for dishes was genetically encoded, and that there would be little I could do. But I hope Grandma knows, too, somehow, that I came to her table at last. And that on those long days of sorting and laughing, her daughter and her granddaughter celebrated her life. 