Silent Witnesses
Things have a life of their own. It is simply a matter of waking up their souls.


Every object trails a line of autobiography. The objects included in this booklet and gathered from a variety of sources are grounded in personal memories. They have been the silent witnesses, sometimes over generations, to events within the home. They also represent stories that are common to all.
Frances

As a young woman I married into a family whose collective body language and attitudes towards me made it clear that I was not the woman they would have chosen to share their son's life. In their view I had neither the special skills nor the background to support a young man in his professional career. To give them their due they tried hard to help me overcome my perceived faults, but I was a less than diligent student and it was very hard for me to show anything other than disappointment when yet another gift from them turned out to be 'something for the home', a set of fine damask table linen is no substitute for one's favourite perfume!

However amongst the Tupperware, food mixers, manners and recipe books, there was a small vase that I loved immediately and which, as it turned out, was to change the course of my life. My mother-in-law, no doubt pleased that I was at last showing some appreciation of what were in her view, the finer things in life, told me that it was a family piece and that she looked forward to the day when this vase and all the family property would go to her grandchildren. My eyes followed her waving arms, dark gloomy antiques surrounded us and I began to appreciate that my allotted role, if I was to stay with this family, would be the caretaker of someone else's history and a breeder for their future. Not surprisingly I began to immediately reshape my own future and when it came to the crunch, left the family fold, taking only their vase with me

Taking the vase was consistent with my normal pattern of behaviour. As I have already said, I have always loved objects and as a child collected all sorts of things that had tactile quality or visual appeal and arranged them like small still lives in the tiny space allotted to me in a shared bedroom. I continued this habit into adulthood and this vase, small, plump, and just 10 centimetres high, fitted perfectly into my palm and felt good to hold. I loved the colours of the hand-painted bunch of blackberries evocative of damp misty Northern Hemisphere autumns. In addition I knew a little about the artist. Who said I knew nothing? I'll bet my then mother-in-law didn't know, for example that Kitty Blake had worked as a paintress for the Royal Worcester Potteries for 48 years (1905-1953). Kitty's skill as a china painter enabled her to find a job that, at that time, was a socially acceptable method for a woman to earn a living. And, unlike the thousands of other paintresses who worked for the potteries, Kitty, as an acknowledgment of her skill, had been allowed to sign her work and leave us with a physical record of her existence. In the overwhelmingly patriarchal world of that time, Kitty was a survivor and I felt a strong connection to her. Today the vase sits together with other much-loved objects, on a sideboard, like an arrangement for a still life painting.
In my home, there is a box which contains letters written by me, to my mother, when I first left home, some forty years ago. The letters are full of white lies and half-truths, about how well I was doing and how happy I was. They tell nothing of the difficulties I faced, the loneliness and of the homesickness that was almost crippling. To my mother, these letters, over the period of my absence, became the embodiment of the absent me and as such could never be destroyed. However, when I was recently given back the letters (and to that point I didn’t know that they still existed), I immediately took a very bumpy magic carpet ride back forty years and could actually feel the loneliness and longing that had been excluded from their content. The box was returned to me in silence and received in silence. Neither my mother nor I was willing to expose our emotions and speak about the personal significance of the box and its contents. The box had therefore, in that moment of exchange, acquired yet another layer of meaning; a meaning referential to the relationship that exists between my mother and myself.
Eve

I am so old now that my house is full of objects and it would be hard to isolate one for special notice. So I have chosen the item given to me in the first year of my life, 96 years ago. Naturally I don't remember being given it, but my mother told me it was given to me just before the family emigrated from Scotland to New Zealand. It has over the years been broken and mended and has always travelled with me as a sort of talisman. I don't suppose it will make the last journey though!

Vale – Eve MacArthur

Eve died within weeks of our conversation – the ornament is now treasured by her son.
Antonia

I spent a great deal of my growing up years with my grandparents. It was a home run by clockwork, literally. The hours ticked away to the rhythm of a clock on the mantel piece. Tick tock, breakfast at 7.30, tick tock, lunch at 12.30, tick tock, tea at six, and finally tick tock, bed at nine. The last job for grandad before bed was to make sure that his pocket watch and the mantle clock were synchronised. Satisfied that all was in order he would then tap the barometer, climb the stairs and inform grandma that the needle was either rising or falling. She, in reply would say, “have you put the cat out?” And he would reply “cat’s out, lights out,” and the house would fall briefly into the rhythm of the clock before being joined by his and her snoring. Many cats were put out over the years but the same clock soldiered on, monotonously ticking away time, until the end of grandad’s life. I have his pocket watch now. It doesn’t go and I wear it on a chain as a piece of jewellery. I think of it as symbolic of the fine line between order and chaos – my grandparent’s life and my mother’s. My mother’s life may have been chaotic, but I always wanted to be with her.
Margaret G

I'd had my eye on this boy for ages. He was really spunky. One day he arrived at our front door quite out of the blue: I was about 15 and from my bedroom window I saw him walk up the garden path. I raced to the bathroom: you know, puffed up the hair, lippy, the lot; told my brother to stay in his room on pain of death, and went downstairs to meet him. My mother, unfortunately, got to the door first and they were having a good old chat. “David wants to learn to knit ... he wants to get his Boy Scouts badge” I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Knit? ... That is exactly what we did. Every night on the couch, our needles clicking away, watching Coronation Street with mum also knitting and dad and my brother winking and smirking at each other. David learned to knit and then disappeared from our lives as quickly as he had appeared. He did make one last visit and that was to deliver this little knitted dog as a thank you. I've always loved him (the dog) and have kept him all of these years, not as a memento of unrequited love but because he seems alive and it would be like discarding a pet.
Virginia

This little vase has huge sentimental value for me. It sat on my mother's hall table for years and I never noticed in all of that time that it was crooked. A friend pointed it out to me one day. It makes no difference of course ... even adds to my feelings for it. Another friend with whom I went to kindergarten and who, after I left home, saw more of my mother than I did, has a cup and saucer in the same pattern and when I visit, I have my tea in that cup. It's a connection I feel to my mother.
Mary

The most precious things that I have are photographs of my mother from a time when I cannot remember her. Because my childhood was very painful, those memories got repressed. Clothes of hers from that time, that I still have, act as a conduit to her.
Irene

This champagne cork is an object that I have treasured for over 50 years. In 1950, my husband was posted to Ghana. What a transformation. Out of the frost and snow, war-damaged London and rationing, into sun, palm trees, evening dress and servants. It took me a while to get used to the servants. It was a wonderful life but came to an end when they got their independence. This cork came out of the last bottle of champagne that we shared with friends at the Accra Club. I can see them all now...
Christine

A few years ago, I was driving past the street where I grew up and saw that the whole street was being demolished to make way for a new bypass. Our house was just a pile of rubble. I hadn't ever given the old place much thought; it was a small end terrace and there were eight of us so it was a bit of a squash, but I was surprised at how sad I felt. I picked up a bit of lino from what was left of the kitchen floor, took it home and threw it into a drawer. Every time it surfaces I ask myself, "why do I hold onto this?" But I do because every time I hold it in my hand I can hear mum saying, "get back outside you kids, I've just washed the kitchen floor". I realise now that this is the only thing I have that my mother touched.
Mirella

People often think that I’m not sentimental enough to hang on to anything, but you’d be surprised. There is very little but what I do have is extremely precious. My parents are German immigrants and arrived here in the ’50s with a few clothes and a table lamp. You cannot imagine the horrors that they endured, especially my mother — father missing in action on the Russian front ... mother died of cancer ... time in an orphanage ... fostered by her great aunt and molested by the great uncle ... life in a refugee camp. A horror story. But here they were, stepping off the boat in bright sunshine on the other side of the world, with each other, and the table lamp, to start a new life. The table lamp, I believe is very old, probably Russian and came from the great aunt’s house and was given to me. I also have a Christmas tree decoration, a golden orb. It is also old and was brought out from England by another immigrant family. They lived next door to us and the matriarch of the family, who was a surrogate grandmother to my siblings and I, gave it to us one Christmas. I often look at these objects and wonder what stories they could tell. When you think about it (the families) had been on different sides of the war but here they were, 10 years later, living next door to each other exchanging gifts.
Beatrice

I'm not a sentimental type but interestingly I have never wanted to get rid of this little silver chair – which came from my grandmother's dolls house – the rest of which was destroyed in a fire. I love its artisanship – the velvet seat and silver workmanship. Occasionally I sit it on a shelf where I can see it – but mostly it stays hidden in a drawer. I have a daughter to whom I have passed most family bits – but this little chair I am not ready to part with.
Carolyn

My father tooled this leather bag for my mother – a note left in the bag explains where and when it was made. I am not sure whether the Thornbury Rose was a common design or if it was a reference to Thornbury, the suburb of Melbourne where they might have been living and she was his rose? I like to think that it is the latter. The Rekî symbols are my mother’s way of protecting this object – she distributed these symbols around to protect her loved ones. It adds another layer of meaning to the bag.
Audrey

My dad was a sailor, always away. He’d turn up unexpectedly with armfuls of exotic things from the world. Mum hated most of it. I think she thought it was black magic, savage and sexy (hoots of laughter) so as soon as he left it would go up in the attic. One thing, though, was a tea set for little people. It was for us girls, he said. But mum said it was too good, it’d get broken. So it went in the china cabinet with the coronation mugs and other stuff. When she died it came to me and because I hadn’t been allowed to, I wanted my kids to play with it. Mum was right however as this cup is all that’s left. Now I treasure it and keep it safe as I realise this is the only material evidence left of my Dad’s existence. It brings back the excitement of his visits home which became less and less until they stopped altogether.
Scott

My father was in New Guinea in 1944 with the Australian Army and his spare time he managed to make a bracelet for my mother from the scraps of a crashed plane. Dad had little artistic temperament and it was quite an achievement, I believe, for him to have undertaken such an enterprise. On two of the hearts he had scratched 1944, on a third my Mother's name, Marjone, and on a fourth, New Guinea. All the others are blank. There is something really macabre about making a love token from a crashed aeroplane (probably Japanese), especially as it is likely that someone died in it. Mum treasured it but never wore it, probably because it's barely big enough for a child!
June

I am adopted. My adoptive parents had everything except a child and so to complete their lives they got me. From the start I was a disappointment; not the pretty, compliant daughter that my adoptive mother dreamed would share her love of frills and fancy things. I was wilful, a tomboy and preferred old clothes to the pretty dresses that hung in my wardrobe. My hair was coarse and wouldn’t hold a ribbon and my face was covered in freckles. I always preferred to be outside but on wet days confined to my room I would set up mock battles or similar aggressive sporting contests between the smugly smiling teddies and cutesy dolls. A number of delicate objects that filled a shadow box were casualties of one such battle. As it crashed to the floor I can remember thinking all hell would break loose, and I was right. I only had time to pick up one piece before the door burst open. After all the cleaning up, recriminations and commotion I was left in a bare room because “God knows you don’t deserve anything”! I was still clutching the headless and armless figurine. To me she’s very symbolic of everything I wasn’t — pretty and decorative. I’m not saying that I suffered seriously because of the differences between my adoptive mother and me. We learned to jog along quite well in the end. Perhaps that’s why I keep this. In retrospect it was a turning point in our relationship; she stopped trying to make me something I wasn’t.
Kath

My daughter died nine years ago of cancer and during her last few weeks made this little stuffed penguin. When she died and I was clearing out her hospital room I asked the nurse to pass it on to the children's ward. The nurse, a really caring person, looked me in the eye and said, "no, you keep it". She was absolutely right. You know, I have that little penguin in my car and I often talk to him, he's such a comfort. That nurse knew something about grief.
Regina

These shards of pottery came from the New Mexico desert and belong to Indian culture before being overlaid and very nearly obliterated by Spanish, Mexican and Anglo colonisation. If you kick the dirt, especially around the ancient pueblos, you'll nearly always find a shard. I have these on my mantelpiece to remind me that each generation is just passing through, and it's important to value difference and to tread the earth lightly.
Diana

Nana's jug is part of a set that she used every day. Now I use the jug every day and I'm sure that would make her happy. I have the whole set, in fact, given to me by my mother who has never wanted stuff around and has said, on more than one occasion, that one only has children in order to pass on bits that are too sentimental to throw away. I feel differently, I love using nana's jug but as I am always having to remind my daughter that it cannot be chucked into the dishwasher I wonder about its life after me. Of course, my daughter never knew her grandmother Maybe knowing the person and having a clear memory of that person is what makes it special for me.
Sheila

I was at the tip shop one day when I spotted this paper cow. I think a child probably made her. For me it was love at first sight and I wondered how anybody could possibly have thrown her away. Her eyes seemed to follow me and I said to myself, "no, you don't need more rubbish", and walked away from her. But you know a week later I was still thinking about that cow, so I went back and she was there, waiting just for me.
Anna

I have worn this necklace for about 30 years. Originally my mother gave me the charms, which were hanging from a bracelet that was worn by my great-great-grandmother. My husband bought me the gold necklace to which they are attached. Among the charms is a small golden letter, about 1.5 x 2 cm, which was posted in New Zealand. On one side is engraved the address, and an enamelled stamp was put on the top right-hand edge. On the other side was the message, “wishing many happy returns, 23.5.1906, so it successfully travelled from sender to recipient over 100 years ago! All the other charms are significant to my family. They include a small penknife used to cut the top off my great-great-grandfather's cigars, and a cameo from a ring of my grandmother's. There is also a jade jelly bean that my mother wore when she played golf as a young woman; it was originally a tie pin. Each of these charms is significant to me because the women in the family have always believed that the family wealth (jewellery) should pass from woman to woman. This thinking has always symbolised strength of character and wisdom to me, and I remember it when decisions have to be made.
Annette

This beautiful figurine of a naked young woman was my maiden aunt's. When I heard that all her house and contents were to be auctioned off, I stood in the rain for hours waiting for her lot number to come up. That side of the family hadn't spoken to our side for years. Fortunately for me, she was well and truly hidden in a box of useless things, and as most people there seemed more interested in the furniture, no-one else bid for her. I can't really explain what it is about the figurine that I love so much. The connection certainly isn't to family; we are a seriously dysfunctional lot. She is so beautifully crafted that despite her small size the figure seems real and very vulnerable — something from the fairy world and I've always believed in the little people.
My little pink musical bear is one of my favourite possessions. He’s lost a lot of hair but that is hardly surprising given his age. He belonged to my mother when she was a child and has provided comfort to three generations, so he is about 88-years-old.
Trish

I have a blackened tablespoon that is the sole surviving material item of my life before the 1967 bushfires. We picked over the rubble for days but this is all we found. It's a heartbreaking experience. My husband said, "throw that away, we don't need to be reminded," but I never did and here it is. Now he shows it off to people as a prized possession! After the fire we tried not to accumulate anything so that we'd never have to deal with that sort of pain again, so the spoon is really, past and present.
After my father's death I was helping my mother move to a retirement home and I came across a silver tea set that she had kept hidden for more than 60 years. Her story, without the emotion, is as follows: engaged to be married; war broke out; the fiancé went off and didn't write, mother married my father, who seemed to be lurking in the shadows. Fiancé turns up, saw she was married and presented her with the tea service. He was perhaps a little miffed at her betrayal and wanted to show her that she'd have been a lot better off, materially at least, with him. However, my father made a stand and refused to have the tea service in the house. My mother, who may have already been regretting her marriage, defied him and hid it. My brother and I certainly knew that their marriage wasn't made in heaven and the tea set story went a long way to explaining the exasperating, painful pattern of their marriage. I feel extremely saddened by this wretched tea set. It has been earmarked for the eldest granddaughter, my daughter. But it seems so contaminated by deceit, regret and frustration that it should be thrown away. However, my mother will have none of it and now that it is in the light she lovingly polishes it.
Julie

Aunty Bet was such a snob, she said you could tell the calibre of a person by what china they used. She took these cups with her to the nursing home and when I visited, always insisted that her teacups were used. “Mustn’t let standards drop,” she’d say. Often she’d point to others and in a loud voice tell me something quite nasty or bitchy about them. It was really embarrassing.

Poor Auntie Bet. She’d spent her life trying to prove to the world that she really belonged to the aristocracy but that by some misfortune she had found herself among the working class. I enjoy her cups, though. Before they were Auntie Bet’s they belonged to her mother, my paternal grandmother, and I value that link.
Olivia

I inherited my mother's button tin, which didn't interest me particularly until, I began to recognise buttons from clothes that I had worn as a child – and many from her clothes. They prompted so many memories. It started a fascination with buttons and I've added to the collection over the years. I'm sure each one has a story to tell.
This enamel teapot was my grandfather's first gift to his wife so that there would be plenty of tea in the pot for the workers who came to help crop the hay.
Fiona

When I was three I was given a puglet: a small pink toy covered in pink nylon velour and filled with seeds. We became inseparable. He has slept with me and travelled with me for 30 years. When I was recovering from a lightning strike he stayed with me in the hospital and, when I was about nine and told to leave him at home, while we as a family travelled to India, I hid him in my pack. On our return, the customs officials wanted to cut him open and see if there were drugs being smuggled within puglet's body. I screamed the place down, hung on tightly and wouldn't let him go. My mother grabbed puglet and gave him to the official but he handed him back to me saying that if it was that difficult to get the toy away it was unlikely that anybody would have managed to insert drugs into his body. I am now in a significant relationship and it's a case of love me, love my puglet.
Dorothy

That pot over there came from my grandmother's house. I sort of rescued it when they were clearing up the house. No-one wanted it – it was in a pile to go to the dump. I remembered it as a child, my grandfather stuck all those bits of broken china on it. See that ear? Must have come from a broken china doll. He used to tell us grandkids that it could hear what we were saying and we believed him!

That teapot lid was amongst the rubbish too. I remember the pot in gran's kitchen; it sat on the table most of the day. Sometimes when we arrived she'd be relaxing with a book propped up against the pot but she'd always leap up and make a fresh pot for the visitors. My God but that woman could drink tea!
Margaret

My husband gave me a mink jacket in the mid-'70s, when we were desperately poor. We couldn't afford to go out wining and dining and as it was the only coat I had, I wore it everywhere and with everything – over jeans to go shopping, to work, the football. We even had it on the bed as an extra blanket on cold nights. Eventually it started to show signs of wear and tear and went into the dress-up box for the children to enjoy. Not long ago I heard that you could have fur jackets repaired, so I pulled it out of the box and had it fixed. Now I do only wear it on special occasions and am always a little wary that someone might challenge me for wearing fur, but I absolutely love it for the spirit in which my husband gave it to me.
Literary References
Alan Bennett

*Untold Stories*, Faber and Faber Limited and Profile Books Ltd, 2005 London

Diary Entry 8th Jan.

Note how personalised and peopled in the material world is a level almost beneath scrutiny. I’m thinking of the cutlery in the drawer or the crockery I every morning empty from the dishwasher. Some wooden spoons, for instance, I like, think of as friendly; others are impersonal or without character. Some bowls are favourites; others I have not feeling for at all. There is a friendly fork, a bad knife and a blue and white plate that is thicker than the others which I think of as taking the kick if I discriminate against it by using it less.

Set down, this seems close to insanity but it goes back to childhood when the entire household was populated with friends and not friends and few objects were altogether inanimate, particularly knives and forks. Both shoe brushes had characters. The bad brush with which the polish was put on, the good brush brought out the shine. This was true of clothes too, with a patchwork blouse I had to wear as a toddler thought of as unfriendly and which I always disliked. Sticks had character, too, and cushions. Sixty years later, more traces of this animistic world persist than I would like, making mockery of reason and sense.
Recipe books included not just ingredients but also the ticks of the trade. Recipes were not shared randomly; they were only given to women who were close, trusted and worthy. The old book which, to an outsider, appeared like a collection of scrap paper held together with the remains of long gone feasts, included recipes, remedies and household tips. People who were not liked were not recorded, only good friends would give the right quantity.

In Mum’s brown book of recipes beside each recipe were details of the date, person and source of the recipe. Mostly they came from friends, neighbours and relatives and one for Mother’s recipe for punch... making it at Christmas had become a tradition. That’s the recipe that made me notice the book was no longer there.

After mum died, my brother, his fiancée and father cleaned up the house and moved some of their belongings to the old family home.

They did it as a kindness. Their attitude was ‘keep what is useful and new’. When I discovered the book was not there and my brother was not sure of its fate, I panicked. My sister, who was still grieving for our mother, was distraught. My brother knew from the tone of her voice that something was amiss. We found the book had been taken up to the old house and retrieved it. It’s now with my sister down at Warrnambool. I suppose our family is sentimental but it’s because of those links. It’s more than just hoarding, it’s part of ourselves.
Kate Grenville

The Secret River
The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne 2005

Everything they had owned in London had been pawned, or sold or stolen during the voyage. Even his old leather hat and Sal’s good blue shawl her father had given her .. even those had gone. But there was one thing she had brought from London that became more dear to her than any of those other objects because it was the one that remained to her: a broken piece of clay roof tile that she found in the sand by Pickly Herring Stairs the morning of her last day in London. It was worn and rounded from the tides of years, but the bulge along the edge could still be seen where the clay had been punched into a straight line, and a hole where it had been tied on to the batten. The hole was not quite round, and its inner edge retained the grooves where a stick had been jabbed through the damp clay.

“I’ll take it back to Pickle Herring Stairs by and by,” she said, rubbing her thumbs over its smoothness. “Right back where it came from”. The thing was like a promise, that London was still there, on the other side of the world and she would be there too, one day.

Sometimes she still said, “When we go Home”, and she still kept the bit of old roof tile in her workbox.
Rachel Whiteread

*Rachel Whiteread, Embankment*

The Unilever Series, Tate Publishing 2005, Page 75.

Following the death of her mother and clearing out her house...

... we all had equal memories of baking cakes for my mum, or separating eggs. I've got this funny red plastic, fried eggy object. Just totally silly. But I felt: 'No I need to have that.' Why I needed to have it, I've no idea. I'm actually using it in the kitchen ... Obviously it's incredibly painful, but also quite cathartic when you do go through all of this stuff.

But there's one other thing, actually, here in the studio. You see these three cardboard boxes ascending in size each box containing a broken pyrex bowl. That was actually an artwork of my mum's. She used to have them up the staircase in her house, like plaster ducks. I love having them here.
Linda Gregoriou


**Pixie**

I found Pixie in my grandmother’s linen closet under a pile of sheets when I was seven. I was always fascinated with fairies and goblins and had convinced myself that I was really a mermaid waiting to grow a tail. I was excited when I discovered Pixie. I had never seen anything that looked more exquisite and now I had my very own magical friend. I knew he was real because he wore pearl buttons, pointy green shoes and was 472 years old. Pixie had been my mother’s doll in the late 1930s and had a green velvet cap, orange waistcoat and hands. Having lived in the linen cupboard for forty years, by the time he became my companion, his hands had disintegrated and he had lost his cap and coat. I didn’t care; I preferred him bald anyway. I was delighted by the fact he had a bulbous head, no chin, fat cheeks and a barrel body. Pixie travelled everywhere with me. We would spend hours playing in my grandmother’s garden (where all good fairies belong) and he would sit on a throne made from pink camellia buds and maidenhair fern. We would watch the gold fish and I would imagine I was his princess. It was delicious. I would study his beguiling, mischievous features and wonder what he was really thinking. Was he an old goblin or a baby pixie? By the time I was ten I had become fascinated with pictures of skin diseases in medical text books such as leprosy and impetigo. Pixie’s feet started to fall off and I knew he had leprosy. So I hastily sewed them back on before the disease spread. I sometimes wonder where he came from. His left foot contains a tag ‘Made in England’ by Norah Wellings.

Was Norah Wellings queen pixie and how did he fly to Australia to cast his spell over my mother and me?
Louise Bourgeois


Don't look for any real value in this object. It has for me only a symbolic one, loaded with passion. Its significance is totally hermetic, and the key to the mystery – by now forgotten into the unconscious – yet the magic remains.
Frank Howarth

*The Age, Good Weekend*, August 16, 2008

Platter

Howarth comes from a long line of kitchen wizzes. "My mother and grandmother were fabulous cooks," he says. "They were both a lot more experimental than their contemporaries. I remember having zucchinis as a child, which was fairly exotic for a white-bread Anglo family." About a decade ago, Howarth's mother, Shirley, now 83 and still cooking up a storm, bequeathed this Royal Doulton platter and its small cousin to her son, they had once belonged to Howarth's godmother, Nan Brent. "They were in the sideboard at home after Nan died and I always took more than a passing interest in them," he says. "Although most of the stuff we have is white minimalist, we use them all the time – they're like a link back to all those wonderful women."
A stranger’s gift embraces the circle of life

This week I finally went to meet this marvellous woman and receive the ring. Dora is upright in posture, elegant of dress and lives in the most extraordinary house. “Come in, I’ll give you a tour,” she declared and in I walked to a house full of collections. Ten-thousand teacaddies, it seemed, were neatly arranged on the kitchen mantel. A bouquet of antique rolling pins lolled in a wicker basket. Snow domes, blue glass animals, eggcups, cameos, cabinets of perfume spray bottles, walls of seascapes, and a room eerie with several million Humphrey B. Bears — all giving me gimlet-eyed stares. It was like a fairy-house, neat as a pin, crammed with the evidence of an inquiring, acquisitive and amused soul.

Dora had made lunch (a very English steak and kidney pie); she poured some wine and we sat down for some stories: Dora, going to a dance one night as a 16-year-old against her father’s wishes, coming home to a locked door and never returning; a year later, living off the sale of wild berries she picked, nearly starving in the coastal town she had moved to; the time she was locked in a room so she wouldn’t fall prey to a supposed white slave trader. Dora, up to her hips in the Channel, helping soldiers out of skiffs from the evacuation of Dunkirk. The sea was still as a mirror that day,” she said. “I bailed the poor lads out of the boats and sent them into town for a cup of tea and a wad.”

“A wad!”

“A lump of bloody cake!” She giggled, and with that word, that image of the glassy sea and the exhausted soldiers needing a cup of tea, I understood that here was a living piece of history.

I listened while Dora talked and talked of her difficult, cheeky, entirely self-possessed life. When she stopped, we were only up to her engagement. Her husband proposed on their first date, on a bus. Startled, she said yes. He went home and got out the box in which lay his childhood measure. “It was what they called a gypsy ring,” she said. There it was on the table before me, a slender band of gold, two sapphires and a little diamond, very similar to my own great-grandmother’s long-lost engagement ring. Dora smiled as I picked it up. Her son, too, lost a ring on that same beach, and the next day, walking there, he found it again. Sometimes the more unexpected a return, the more right it seems.

I held the ring. Worn by an unknown someone; lost in salty water on the other side of the world; found; worn again for decades against a warm finger. And now here, for me to wear and eventually pass onwards, along with the story, as the story of one year finishes and the new begins.

NEXT WEEK: ROBERT DREWIE