

Tarnish

Rebecca Minelga

The silver cup is engraved with my name. Well, my first and middle name. No last name. By then I was on my second one, anyways. The first was a technicality; a legal loophole that was closed when I was two weeks old, a scrawled signature that turned *father* into *donor*.

It was done by hand. The second "c" curling slightly more than the first; the bump of the second "n" slightly wider. Where the "e" begins the tool slipped slightly, leaving a deeper groove. It is a vanity; a machine could have done it faster and better, but there is privilege and elitism in insisting it be hand-crafted.

Once shining and new, it was used to pour water over my head as a baby, then put away in a pink, satin-lined box. When I got my third last name it was tucked high on a shelf in my closet. It wasn't a toy, after all. It was an *heirloom*. My older son has a similar one hidden in the same place, blue satin-lined, still polished to a high sheen. Pewter instead of silver; less likely to tarnish. Never used. The younger one never got his set; my grandmother died while I was pregnant with him.

Mine is marked by age, the metal turning almost rosy. When I married my husband at twenty—my fourth last name—my parents sent a pallet of boxes to our college apartment. It must have been included, though I don't remember unpacking it. Splotches of green look like algae blooms, creeping across the surface, unwashed for a lifetime. Grey and brown mottling pits the outer surface, leprotic, necrotic.

I could polish it, I suppose. Restore it. But to what end? It is the silver flatware set stored under the guest bed in my mother's house, initials of a great-great-grandmother that I never knew monogrammed on every handle. Only those who have never had to polish their own silver would ever use it; another vanity. I prefer stainless steel and the convenience of my dishwasher. *But it's an heirloom*, insists my mother. That word again. When does an heirloom become nothing more than an emotional burden to a long-dead ancestor?

I turn the cup over in my hands and remember a spoon, a bowl. Long gone. Where are they now? On a shelf in my grandparents' silver closet? Lost to time? Perhaps one day I'll see them as I browse the shelves of my local thrift shop, tucked behind a set of plates or between the soup bowls and salad bowls. Yes, they are different, yet as familiar to me as choosing the fish fork or the dinner fork.

Wedding china that is used for our daily meal, and my mother shakes her head. My sons are seen *and* heard, whirlwinds of energy and another shattered piece of crockery. Three sets grace my shelves, intermingled. They don't match, but they don't mismatch, either. They are used. They are things. They are not worth the heartbreak of loss. A broken plate is far better than a broken spirit,

and I won't yell when my sons miss the edge of the counter while clearing their things. There are lessons in life, and then there are *lessons*.

I found my cup tucked in the back of the shelf above the refrigerator during our kitchen renovation last summer. I moved it to a box of odds and ends in the utility room. A useless artifact of a bygone era, it doesn't have a home in my house; it doesn't have a purpose. And perhaps it doesn't need one. Perhaps it could be nothing more than a pretty bauble and still have value, but then it would have to matter to me.

I can't find the small, plastic cup for pouring water in my iron. I'm pawing through the shelves looking for it when my eye is caught by a bit of tarnished metal. *That will work*. I run water in the bathroom sink and fill it half-way. Once, it poured water over my own head; today, it pours into another vessel. Thirty-six years is a long time to wait, and my iron is less glamorous than a vaulting chancel and altar. I'm surprisingly okay with that.

Rebecca Minelga is a new writer who uses the power of words to navigate the liminal space between who we are and who we are becoming. Her agented memoir about training dogs and processing trauma is currently on-sub and looking for a publishing home. She left her Boston home to follow her Alaskan husband to western Washington, where she pretends to homestead while raising two boys and an ever-evolving parade of guide dog puppies.