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Come in...and be captivated...

Writers' Contest!

As we are nearly always up for trying something new, for this edition of the Writers' Contest, we are doing a non-fiction challenge this time around as opposed to the numerous fiction contests we've had in the past.

Here are the rules:

Submit a piece (3,500 max) based on an unusual object that you often keep with you and most importantly tell us why you keep the item (luck, memory, etc...). For Gentlemen~ search pockets and wallets for inspiration. For Ladies~ do a search and rescue of your handbags for ideas. You might be surprised at what you find, previously unaware of it, and if so, include that in your piece.

Winners shall receive a \$10 gift certificate to Barnes & Noble bookstore and their entries shall be posted here.

An example piece is taken from the Our Stories non-fiction section and featured below to give the idea of the challenge.

Good luck and enjoy! We look forward to reading about your mementos!

A Lighter Tale of Baggage

By Nicole M. Bouchard

When you think of all the things a person amasses in the course of their lives, objects large and small, some temporary, some lasting, precious or wasteful, we are a species of collectors. From spare change and crumpled movie ticket stubs in coat pockets to heirloom furniture, we are seekers and keepers of tokens that serve as proof of our life experience.

Migratory birds who make their nests in different locations each year or beasts nestled in their caves are hardly in need of garage sales. Our constant need to collect, de-clutter and collect again might seem frivolous to the natural world, but then again, civilization tells its stories through artifacts and the emotions attached to them. Objects are anything but objective.

I think, here, of an item no bigger than half my thumb that travels on important occasions by my side in the cozy pocket of one of my fancier handbags. It certainly isn't one of most precious items or even one that has a great tale attached to it. Really, it is only a moment. One brief memory involving a stranger.

It is next to nothing to look at in its peachy ochre shell, splattered with dots of brown paint over a simple styrofoam body. The artificial egg has a hole on the bottom where the crisp white styrofoam shows through in the spot where it became unglued from a piece of Easter

décor. It is smooth to the touch, nearly weightless in the palm and utterly out of place amongst the other contents of the handbag. It would seem to be a complete oddity to anyone who was unaware of how it came to claim its special place.

Distracted by the thoughts of my generation, stepping into a different role, concerns of work, expenses, desires to one day start a family of my own, when to find that very specific place of mine in the world, I was walking around the store in a haze. Possibility, opportunity and expectation all thrilling and antagonizing by turns... 'what if' on each breath, I felt like the season. It was the end of winter, promises of spring to come so near but so far, bursting at the seams with waiting. The section of Easter decorations soothed away some of the dull ache with pastels racing in to wash the wintry gray from the corners of my mind. I was present, yet not wholly aware, still in the dreamy sort of half-presence that comes of long winter months.

Bright laughter and subsequent reprimands caught my attention. A little boy shopping with his mother found the prospect of playing with every item in reach to be delightful. Easter wreaths became princely crowns, glittering garlands lassos and festive rabbit topiaries royal staffs to be held aloft in fairy courts. All of these, the better to worry his mother with.

I couldn't help but smile. Wasn't I the same way? Luckily I had been allowed my whimsical perspective.

Perhaps sensing a kindred spirit, the boy, little more than five, turned his attentions to the more amused audience.

"Aren't these nice?" he called out holding up one of his crowning wreaths.

"Magical," I replied.

"These too?"

"Especially those."

He went to gather more items with his flustered mother trailing after him, telling him to put down his findings and let the nice lady go on shopping. A disappointed shrug was his answer. Yet before he moved on, he secretly pried loose a small egg from one of the wreaths.

Quietly, he rushed up to me with his fist closed. "This is beautiful," he whispered. "Here. I want you to keep it."

This offering was one he took very seriously.

"I love it. Thank you so much..." I could barely finish my sentence before he pressed the egg carefully in my palm and ran off again at the call of his mother.

I spotted them once more in the store before leaving. He'd draped his mother in artificial summer ivy but this time she laughed and tousled his hair.

So I keep the little secret egg in that handbag as a reminder to delight in the present, remember to play and to know that there is a spring for every kind of winter,

filled with new beginnings, hope, growth, youth and promise; but most of all, I keep it as a treasured token of kindness. There are many instances of it in the world. I've been fortunate to give and receive them yet as a species we collect bits of proof about where we've been and what we've experienced so that one small, half a thumb-sized object isn't just the kindness of one stranger, but symbolic of all I've encountered from any I've ever met.

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