



Speck

by Nancy Ford Dugan

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She had spindly fingers, as did all the members of her family, regardless of their size. Even the manly men had delicate digits. In fact all the Leyden boys were left-handed and this, combined with their “spider” fingers, subjected them to much ridicule during their grammar school years. In her case it resulted in many spills, constant droppage, wet glasses slipping through her useless fingers, breakage and shattered pieces of glass along the floor. She became expert at assembling the shards. In an effort to avoid injuring her building’s compactor or handyman, she’d diligently label the packaged debris with a Post-it, shakily stapled to the recycled garbage bag, that warned “CAREFUL—BROKEN GLASS.”

When she was younger, she tried to convince herself her fingers were artistic rather than clumsy.

She was down to only one glass and was tired of washing it whenever she changed beverages. She hand-washed everything herself, adding to the likelihood of breakage, even though she consistently wore yellow plastic gloves to improve her grip. The gloves made her hands hot and sweaty and puckered in the index finger after she peeled them off, requiring a firm slap against the counter to straighten them out.

Ironically, of course, her mother had left her, her only daughter, all of her china, including gold-rimmed goblets, after her long, immobilizing illness had ended and the Leyden siblings had concluded their decade of caring for her. These goblets were currently in boxes in the basement of one of the Leyden brothers and a mere train ride away. But whenever she visited and suggested checking out the boxes, this Leyden brother held off that chore with a carefully selected alternate activity for the duration of her fixed visit.

She recognized that in her unreliable fingers, the goblets would be doomed. But she wanted to see them, to hold them, to admire their elegant shape and their texture that demanded non-dishwasher care, to recall their memories of happier, healthier times and family banquets and holidays. (Unlike the meals she tends to have now. Last night she had dined at a restaurant with a friend, who had put on his glasses to inspect the speck salad. I don’t see any speck, he said. Don’t tell me, she replied, that there isn’t a speck of speck in your speck salad? She had laughed. He hadn’t. The waiter had brought a plate of speck to the table once it was pointed out that it was missing from the salad. “It’s not the same,” her friend had said, “when it’s separate.”)

Her desire for the goblets expanded: she craved them, even if she knew she’d be the shepherd of their destruction. They belonged to her. And she was afraid of using them and prevented from using them. A friend once gave her Christmas holiday goblets as a gift. There were four, each with a gleaming, hand-painted poinsettia and a plump shape that she cupped happily in the palm of her hand, avoiding the graceful yet willowy (and possibly more accident-prone) stem. She loved them so much she did not reserve them for Christmas but drank all of her beloved beverages out of them all year long. Over time, one by one, each shattered from overuse, like her mother. She kept the remains, the skull of one, on a shelf to remind her of their glory.

Nancy Ford Dugan's short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize (in 2012 and 2013) and appeared in over 25 publications, including *Cimarron Review*, *Passages North*, *The Minnesota Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Epiphany*, *Delmarva Review*, *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Superstition Review*, and *Tin House's Open Bar*. She lives in New York City and previously resided in Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, DC.

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