



Heirlooms

A LOVER OF CONTEMPORARY STYLE
DISCOVERS A BIT OF HIMSELF AND HIS
LOVED ONES EMBEDDED WITHIN THE
MYSTERIOUS PROVENANCE OF AN ANTIQUE
POCKET WATCH.

In Search of lost time...

The other day I met a beautiful antique pocket watch — George Prior Triple-Cased — courtesy of Antiques Roadshow.

I marvelled at its triple-layered construction: interior metal casing nested in nickel silver, nested in tortoiseshell. They just don't make them like this anymore, so I decided to imagine it still ticking. Not that the appraiser or owner said as much, so I couldn't really know that its movement still successfully marked, but it didn't matter. I just knew.

What really struck me was its provenance. I was astonished to learn of its Islamic script; that the London-crafted piece was likely exported for sale in the Middle East; that somehow it found its way to Louisville, land of bluegrass and bourbon, 200 years later. Somehow.

If only tortoiseshell could talk. What would George Prior Triple-Cased tell us about his journey, the days he kept on schedule, the individuals who once called themselves his owner? Did George overhear political debate in a Gentleman's parlour? Was he safe-kept in a shoebox in a closet of threadbare clothes? Did a hungry war widow thumb it clean

before the inevitable pawnshop sale?

It may seem trite, as Roadshow is a showplace solely for vintage and antique collectibles, but this piece struck me in particular: What a *gift* history has given us.

Consider: A unique set of events delivered this gorgeous curio from early nineteenth century London to the exotic Middle East, where it might have been purchased by an Arab, or a British or French occupier.

Finally, in 2009 the watch ticktocked to the humdrum of Louisville after negotiating thousands of miles and a minefield of chances to be destroyed or lost to obscurity. Somehow. Still, how to separate wheat from chaff? Some timepieces chime or tick with a vitality that doesn't mark the moment as much as exclaim *I own the moment!* Others fast-slide into silence like a pin quick into a cushion.

How did our Prior resolve from ornament to heirloom? Is it easy on the eyes? Certainly. Yet beauty is no guarantee of safe passage to the present. Our Prior could have appeared anywhere — or nowhere.

Our Days Are Short

... And Too Easily Measured

We'll just consider it our good fortune, thank you — and give it slight advantage as the sort of object that invites sentimental attachment, because like all timepieces it imparts a sense of order in the present by strengthening our attachment with the past. Can you imagine where we might be without our reliance on the principles of beginnings and endings, seconds and centuries? Our sense of the hour provides structure and meaning to decisions as small or large as washing dishes or changing careers...

...because each of our moments is attached to the one that came just before it. While we may not understand what moves us to a particular decision, while we may fret over choice based on gut intuition instead of rational analysis, we can still acknowledge a result determined by the memories we registered on our personal time line as important enough to remember and when needed, recall.

Still, while every moment is a choice dictated by memory, we also can't ignore the looming finish, especially as we age. Past begins to overshadow future and our present feels tenuous at best. While we can't know our future, we can certainly ruminate upon its possibilities, flirting with the Pandora's box of when, where and how it might end.

Our days are short and too easily measured. A mixed blessing to be sure. In the immortal words of Proust, eternally, we're In Search of Lost Time.

And we search and search.

Remarkable, those memories, lolling in our subconscious on the off chance a particular set of circumstances might startle one to the surface. Kind of like the snap recollection of a dream you'd forgotten you'd remembered (before it was then promptly forgotten).

For me, that sort of reminder sometimes occurs when visiting family, perhaps on holiday, hugging

a grandmother wearing her 90s a bit less comfortably than her 80s — breathing in her scent so familiar,

and suddenly recalling the forts I built in her living room decades ago, hiding from the grumps one of my small rebellion rituals, each fortified with cushions imprinted with her flowery perfume.

I remember barely containing my excitement. To build a sofa-fort is never to hide, never just to barricade. For boys, it's an adrenaline rush, a sense of escape — from the grumps and then back to them — from fleeting independence back to the safety of family. Trembling with toddler excitement, when I just couldn't stand it any more, I'd reveal myself, revel in the reveal, and be discovered, safe and loved.

Catalysts all: A special occasion, a hug, a scent, a memory lost deep in the gray matter, somehow magically retrieved.

I guess in a way I was a pocket watch. No. Scratch that. We're all pocket watches. Marking time by memory not movement, and not just for ourselves but for each other, for connection with the past, a connection which if nothing else roadmaps the journey to our present selves, a road of reasons that define why we are, who we are, who we might be...and why I'm with you at this very moment.

When my grandmother was born, the George Prior Triple-Cased was already a century old. At 93, Grandma's memory isn't what it once was and unlike the watch, her patina isn't ageless. To be fair, the pocket watch of imprecise origin and indeterminate peregrination can't make memory or share the secrets of a long life. Even its heart might no longer beat, although I choose to think otherwise.

(I wonder which memories led me to that choice?)

Still, both manage to carry on. And help each other, in their way.

Remember when I used to build sofa-forts in your living room, Grandma? Remember?

Oh my, yes. I do now.