

The Button Box

SOPHIA SPERDAKOS

A BUTTON, LIKE A LIFE, IS A THING OF BEAUTY AND FUNCTION, IMAGINATION AND PURPOSE. In repeated buttoning and unbuttoning there is history and memory and the passage of time. She tells her daughters this, until she is unable to tell them anything at all.

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AN OLD MAN AND A YOUNG GIRL. His long fingers wrap around her tiny ones. In the clasping of hands, their connection is revealed. Trust and love and a mutual longing for something lost. She is Sarah and she is four years old. She and her mother have come to live with her grandparents. It was too lonely at home waiting for her father to return. That was what her mother had said. But in later years, Sarah wondered if her mother had been accepting the inevitability of her coming widowhood. Her father "bought it" at Passchendaele. Someone said so within her hearing and she had run home to find out what Papa had bought. Whatever it was, they hadn't sent it home with his belongings.

She can barely remember her father. Her grandfather's is the male voice in her head, the quiet "goodnight" as she wraps her arms around his neck, the tone that scolds her when she vexes her mother or grandmother, the matter-of-fact announcer of what has happened to Jack, his only son. Jeremiah Borden is a tailor who weaves magic from bolts of shapeless cloth. With finely sculpted hands he measures and calculates and cuts and sews the suits that men are married and buried in. Everyone in town knows that one of his suits is as fine as any in Canada.

But if fabric is his working tool, wood feeds his soul. Sarah stands in front of a workshop with her grandfather. It is a large shed that is mostly windows, with workbenches that run around three of the inside walls and woodworking tools neatly hung on hooks or resting on shelves. Sarah's grandparents' house is dark and spare to match her grandmother's understanding of God and propriety. The woodshop is her grandfather's place of light and artistry.

And it is here, in the week her father's kit is returned, that Sarah's grandfather makes the button box. She watches in silence as he selects some pine and saws the sides and top and bottom of the box, measuring twice and cutting once as he would the pieces of a suit.

"What are you making?"

"A box your grandmother will use for storing buttons. There are always extra buttons in a life, the lost ones that fall from a shirt and are found long after it has worn out, the ones salvaged from a dress or jacket that no longer fits, or replaced to give an old garment a newer appearance."

"She says don't waste anything, so the boys in France can come home sooner."

"Yes."

"But that didn't help Papa."

Her grandfather does not answer. She watches him over the next week as he shapes the wood and fashions the box joints that unite the sides, fits the cover, and finally sands and oils the pine until it gleams. He closes his eyes and runs his fingers over the smoothness of the lid and sides.

"Touch that, Sarah. Make a memory with your fingers."

It feels like flour or a velvet petal or the soft skin on the inside of her mother's arm. When she is done, her grandfather tells her to open the lid. He takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and lays it on the workbench. He stands for a moment staring at the cloth, then unwraps it to reveal seven brass buttons.

He turns them out of the cloth gently and they make a lonely clatter as they land in the bottom of the box.

"These are from your father's uniform."

She understands, has seen the men marching in a parade to the train station, their buttons and boots shining in the sunlight.

"No one needs them anymore?"

"Not anymore."

Sarah stands silently next to Jeremiah as his eyes fix on a place only he can see. Hand in hand they take the box into the house and her grandfather gives it to his wife. He says nothing of the first buttons inside. She says nothing of her dead son; she does not cry. To do so would question God's grace.

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A LETTER ARRIVES FROM THE CEMETERY OFFICE.

Dear Mrs. Borden,

This is to confirm that your husband's stone has now been placed on his grave at site D21, with the inscription you ordered: Jeremiah Borden, 1867–1929, in the service of the Lord. Once again we send our condolences. Please advise us if we can be of further assistance.

Respectfully yours,

Gordon G. Henderson, Director

Jeremiah had made his own burial suit, to be worn only once and for all time, he told Sarah, as he placed it at the back of a wardrobe. His wife complained of the wastefulness of such vanity, but when the time came she dressed him in the suit as he had asked.

At the funeral, Sarah leans in close to his coffin to kiss his cold face and to cut off a button with the small pair of scissors she has secreted in her hand. In her grandmother's button box, filled now with the ordinary and the useful, she pushes the dark brown button to the bottom, where it rests next to those other buttons her grandmother never speaks of. Father next to son.

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SARAH STUDIES BUTTONS. Catalogues them in a notebook. Imagines their creators and the variety of people who sew them into place. She thinks of the mix of utility and art combined in an object so small. Gold, silver, bronze, antler, ivory, bone, horn, shell, and glass, the covered button, the shank button, and the button painted with elaborate scenes. And when she touches her grandfather's button, she smells his soap and feels the softness of his hair where her fingers had curled around it.

His death marks the end of a comforting voice in her upbringing and the loss of conversation. Her life becomes a tableau in which the players are perpetually frozen in a single moment in time. Her grandmother always in black. Her mother a shadow who lives in her mother-in-law's home, her voice silenced by the seriousness of piety. Sarah thirsts for language, longs for experience, vows to fill the button box with memories until it overflows.

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THE NEWSPAPER SAID, "Mrs. Jack Borden announces the marriage of her daughter Corporal Sarah Borden to Captain Michael Seton on June 15, 1946, in Toronto, *Ontario*." Sarah has placed the notice herself.

Her mother has not understood the need to "boast of the marriage to the world," as she puts it. She has absorbed her now dead mother-in-law's restraint, remains alone in the house she moved into temporarily thirty years before. She had been powerless to stop Sarah from enlisting, could not deter her by accusing her of having the same look of excitement and adventure in her eyes that had sent Jack overseas to die.

Sarah knows her mother does not agree with her extravagant choice of a wedding gown or the honeymoon drive across the continent, but she pays for the dress and gives Sarah the button box, empty of all except eight.

"It was really meant for you all along. She never wanted it," her mother tells her, unwilling to use her mother-in-law's name. This her rebellion, finally, to banish the name of her husband's mother after her death. "Jeremiah knew you understood its purpose."

She leaves her daughter to begin her new life.

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ALONE TOGETHER IN A ROOM WITH A BED FOR THE FIRST TIME.

"Damn, how many of these are there?"

"Twenty-five," Sarah laughs sitting on Michael's knee as he methodically undoes the back of her wedding dress.

"They're so damned small."

"Individually covered in cloth by hand, designed to run from the nape of the neck to the bride's delicate waist. So the seamstress said. She said it was meant to make a groom appreciate what he was unveiling."

He utters a cry of triumph as he pulls open the last button and turns her in his arms to face him, his warm hands inside the back of her dress, brushing her skin, his mouth on hers. In the morning she finds that small button on the carpet and bends to pick it up. She is momentarily embarrassed to place it next to her father's and grandfather's buttons. As if they could see what she has done. But she drops it in and gazes at its delicacy next to the patriotic display of her father's and the loneliness of her grandfather's.

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THE BUTTON BOX SITS ON THE MANTLE IN HER SEWING ROOM. The pine has darkened from the sunlight that bathes it every afternoon. The walls are peach and match the carpet on the floor. She uses colours of which her grandmother would not have approved. She has chosen her grandfather's career to earn her living and rooms with light to honour his soul.

Her daughters have learned to roll over and sit up on that carpet. They have played with blocks and rattles and later spilled out the buttons on the peach backdrop and asked for stories of each one. Sarah has sat on the floor with them and recounted her life. The buttons from her uniform, the dresses she wore when she went into labour, their christening gown, Hallowe'en costumes, the blazer their father wore to march on Remembrance Day each year, the jacket he was wearing the day of his accident, the suit he wore on the day they cremated him, the first dress she sold.

There are some buttons she does not describe. "My private buttons," she always says and looks away whenever her daughters ask about them. As they grow up she knows they wonder about secret love affairs and unrealized dreams. It doesn't matter what the buttons signify. It matters that these children remember the separate existence a mother has as a woman.

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IT BEGINS WITH AN UNEASY FEELING. A sensation like a slow leak. A repeated mental hiccup. No more. Not something she can take to the doctor, point to like a lump or a swelling or painful ache. Sarah thinks she will keep the knowledge to herself, as she had when she first began to menstruate, the reality of such an enormous change postponed indefinitely as long as no one else knows.

She begins to fade. How else to describe it? Like the corner of a photograph exposed too long to sunlight. She hits the side of her head repeatedly with the flat of her hand to jolt everything back into place. In her panic she throws out what she does not need. If she can reduce the physical clutter of her life she will lessen the burden on her brain. She avoids sleep, where it seems the theft of memory occurs. She practises the catechism of her family's names.

And one day, she cannot remember the way to her daughter's house, walking up and down streets that seem identical and all of them foreign to her. A creeping humiliation at this loss of self rises in her like a blush.

On the day she gets lost, she pulls a button off the coat she is wearing and drops it into the box.

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TABLE. BED. LAMP. BOX.

There is a table next to her bed.

A lamp is lit on it and sheds light on a box.

She looks at the box that sits on the table.

She pulls it onto her lap and rests it there for a while.

It feels heavy.

She opens it and stares. There are small things inside, all different shapes. She reaches out her hands to touch them. She runs her fingers through them, the coolness soothing. She pours them from the box. They make spots on the white bed cover. She picks up a shiny one. Her fingers rub and rub the surface. Her heart pounds in her chest. She hears the sound of it in her ears.

She pops the button in her mouth, the clicking of it loud against her teeth. She swallows. In front of her she sees a room filled with light, a man polishing

a box. She smiles. She strokes the box and sees flour, a petal, the inside of her mother's arm.

She chooses another button, closing her eyes and placing it on her tongue. She swallows and feels her husband's hands caress the nape of her neck, his moustache tickling her mouth. She scoops in three more and hears her babies cry and laugh and call her name. She grows greedier and swallows a handful, her fist clutched to her chest as she uses saliva to ease the objects down. Her throat expands, her chest contracts.

She lifts her eyes and stares across the room.

Sarah looks at her from the mirror. Her eyes are alight; her head is thrown back in laughter. There is a moment left.

She pulls a button from her shirt.