

Jeffrey Miller
State Plates

My grandmother collected all kinds of bric-a-brac, but the one thing she enjoyed collecting more than anything else, were these state plates. The plates featured a couple scenes from the state; usually some landmarks and famous people like the ones from my home state of Illinois that had a picture of Abraham Lincoln, his home in New Salem, the Chicago skyline, our state flower, and state bird. She started collecting them back in the 1950s, the first time she and my grandfather took their first trip together and continued to collect them right up until she died. She had every plate in the country except ones from Alaska and Hawaii and that was only because she had never been on an airplane in her life to fly to Hawaii if she wanted (she didn't) and Alaska—well, it was just too far away.

Whenever I visited my grandparents, I'd sit at the kitchen table and stare at the plates on the walls and think about the places she and my grandfather had visited. Unlike all the other bric-a-brac she collected and displayed around the house, the plates with their famous landmarks, state birds, and mottos were more amusing and entertaining to look at though the significance was sometimes lost on me. On more than one occasion, my grandfather let it slip that they were more junk to clutter the house and probably made in Japan, which invariably resulted in my grandmother responding with "go and put a sock in it" which I never knew what it meant, but it must have worked because my grandfather got very quiet and usually stormed out of the room.

Three or four times a year, depending on how much dust the plates had accumulated, she would take down the plates to clean them. It usually took her most of the morning, right after Grandpa had gone to work and she washed up the breakfast dishes. I could never understand why she devoted so much time to them when as far as I could see, they just collected dust and had to be cleaned periodically.

I'm thinking about these state plates and how much they meant to my grandmother the day my ex-wife and I went through some boxes I had forgotten about in the attic the past thirty years. I came into possession of these plates not long after she passed away and my grandfather took up residence in a nursing home. At the time, we didn't have any room in our house for them and relegated them to a far corner of the attic. What I really wanted was her collection of carnival glass, but my step-mother already had dibs on that. I got the plates, minus the ones from Alaska and Hawaii.

"You know, if your grandmother had every plate you would make a fortune on eBay," Kimberly said, watching me take out another plate and hold it up to the light that slanted into the attic.

"Yeah, I suppose they would fetch a good price." I carefully wiped the dust from the Florida State plate. My grandfather never cared much for Florida but to make my grandmother happy on a trip through the Deep South, they crossed into Florida long enough to buy a plate at a souvenir

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stand along the highway. "Do people even collect this kind of stuff anymore?"

Kimberly shrugged. "I'm sure someone does."

I nodded and put the plate back into the box.

Kimberly, who came across some of my stuff that had been buried with all her stuff in the attic, was selling the house and moving into a condo in Chicago. Middle-age had softened us both and allowed us a degree of civility when it came to divvying up our stuff. Even our kids who would have to get used to dividing their time with us on the holidays said we were handling the divorce well. Handling it well was also a misnomer. My biggest regret is that Kimberly and I won't grow old together. She's going to grow old with Bob Mercer. At least that's her plan.

Of all the plates my grandmother had, the only one I ever remembered her buying was one from North Carolina. That was when my grandmother and grandfather took a trip to South Carolina and brought me along. My grandfather wanted to visit Fort Jackson in South Carolina where he had been stationed during World War II. After three days of traveling, which took us across Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia, we stopped for the night in Cherokee, North Carolina.

"Oh look, Shorty, there's a souvenir store," my grandmother had said to my grandfather as we pulled into the Tou-Rest Motel across the highway from a large wooden building with a sign advertising fireworks, Indian handicrafts, pottery, and clean restrooms. "Why don't we go there after dinner? I'd like to see if they sell state plates."

My grandfather clenched his teeth on his pipe and nodded. After six hours on the road, not including the hour it took him to change a flat tire and being tailgated down a mountain pass by some "SOB crackpot" as he put it—which immediately brought the wrath from my grandmother for using that kind of language around me—he was probably in no mood for any souvenir shopping, but didn't want my grandmother to know that.

"Yes, Ma," he said, stopping in front of the motel office. "We should do that after we have supper."

Later, while my grandmother put away things inside our motel room before we washed up and had dinner, I watched my grandfather take out a plastic cooler from the trunk of the orange Plymouth Savoy. He was meticulous when it came to everything having its proper place in the trunk and had to rearrange everything after he taken out the spare and changed the flat tire.

"Why does Grandma buy all those state plates anyway?" I asked. "She just hangs them on the wall. You can't even eat off them."

It was an innocuous question, the kind that a ten-year-old would ask, but one my grandfather used to teach a valuable lesson. My grandfather smiled and set the cooler down. "Timmy, your grandmother buys those plates because they are important to her...the same way you buy your baseball cards and comic books."

"Then why do you call them junk?"

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My grandfather half chuckled. "That's because she knows I don't mean it. One day you'll know what I'm talking about."

I took out another newspaper-wrapped plate from the box and removed the newspaper. This one was a plate from Montana. I remembered that trip. It was the one I didn't go on with my grandparents because I wanted to go corn detasseling that summer. I was all of thirteen, thought I knew a thing or two, and lasted only one day; in exchange, I missed a chance to visit the Black Hills, Deadwood City, and Mt. Rushmore with them. Their final destination was Miles, Montana where my grandmother's grandmother had lived for a few years before she died. "I had never met my grandmother," she had said, "but I wanted to see where she was buried before I died." She took a photo of the gravesite overrun with weeds, filled a mason jar with dirt, and before they left Montana, bought a plate for her collection.

Holding the plate in my hands after all those years, I felt connected to my grandmother that hadn't realized when she was alive.

"What are you going to do with them?" Kimberly asked.

I stared at the plate and shrugged before I wrapped it again in newspaper and gently set it back in the box. "I don't know."

There was no room in my small apartment to hang them up. Kimberly was right, I could probably sell them on eBay or maybe, just hold onto them a little while longer. Maybe I could even find ones from Hawaii and Alaska on eBay. Although it wouldn't be the same, not physically traveling to either state to buy one—if they were still even sold in souvenir stands these days—but at least I would have a complete set. And that would be worth something.