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If I Go

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MY GRANDFATHER'S BOX

by Joseph B. Bagdonas

*"The map is not the territory,"
under Tom and Chair Prof's dictum
and truer it could not be
for every wiggle and lost corner straight
and lakes never on the right side.*

*Tent anachronism in RV heaven-haven
and motors replace feet in the most progressive scheme of
evolution
by loss of brain capacity or devolve —
demolocate — either suffices.*

*Forest is untrodden and all wildlife in the shape of Native
American —
displaced myths, of land
and field, only to drink to the demons of history.
Turtle mounds can be spun to face any enemy.
Carve a new head and face it capitolward
for a nice change.
Ojibway learned it wasn't the Dakots to scorn and how does
Bob Mosomo
sleep at night
while listening to the Viking-Saints latest exhibition
while he's listening for Gess lee ze day bwan
in search of ancestor's bones.*

*(You see, they appointed Brave Bob to guard the site
from evil-seekers and revenge-doers.)
Now Mosomo stalks with axe in hand and ear to ground
and Old Mortality in his palm.
All is a watershed — not just a divide
between Mississippi and Hudson, but Native and Interlope
with nowhere to portage.*

— Lee Kesselman

IF I GO

*if I
go
to
sleep here
I will
dream
dreams
bulging
with
unwelcome
visitors*

*everyone
but
you*

*if I
lay
awake here
I lay
alone*

*come
and
visit me
somewhere
will
you?*

— Kathy Corra

I imagine there has been a time in everyone's life when they cherished a box of some kind. A certain special box for keeping secrets, or a box for souvenirs. Little boxes for hair pins, big boxes for marbles or pretty boxes for well read letters. There was such a box in my life. It belonged to my Grandfather.

The box was ordinary in shape, almost square. It was made of dark wood, probably cherry. The wood was deeply engraved with designs that intrigued and mystified me as a child. As the years passed and my intelligence grew, I was able to see the design had continued as the carvers imagination had expanded. Grandfather had made the box when a young man. It was his first carving and according to him, his last.

It would hardly qualify as an artwork, being crude in structure and primitive in design but none the less was very appealing to me. The box was heavily coated inside and out with a lacquer or shellac. Inside it were three smaller boxes, one on top of the other. They came out through the top, one at a time.

The large box locked the three little ones inside with a roughly made brass key, which hung on a nail in the kitchen.

During cold winter nights on the farm, the crackle of the kitchen fire could be heard above the sound of the wind outside. This created an intimate atmosphere which brought our family close together and provided a time after supper when Grandfather told stories in wonderfully expressive Lithuanian.

He would take the old brass key, open the box, and with the contents of the first small box spread on his lap he would begin a story. His stories were always different, but they were always connected with, or inspired by, the objects in the box.

The first little box contained an ancient bullet, a beribboned medal, a spoon and a piece of leather thong. Grandfather described how he acquired these things many times. Every time I begged for the "really true" story, he would settle down, eyes twinkling, and spin a story, diametrically different from the previous explanation.

I learned a great deal of the folklore and history of the people of Lithuania and Russia during these stories. Grandfather told of his days in the Russia Army, when he had served with the Cossacks and his boyhood on his fathers farm. He told of his first visit to a large city so vividly I felt we had made the trip together.

He took each item from the box and held it until it was included in the story. The end would come after the last item was used in the tale.

As I think back, I know everyone in the family enjoyed his stories. The kitchen was always quiet save the ticking of the clock and Grandfathers voice drawing word pictures for us in his melodious Lithuanian dialect.

His stories were exciting, sad, dramatic or quite often laced with side-splitting humor. I remember the whole family rocking with laughter at some of the anecdotes. I know now the stories I considered mine alone were enjoyed by everyone.

If fortune smiled on us, Grandfather would weave a tale with the contents of the second box. This box contained a black stone as big as a robins egg, a gold tassel, some coins and a feather. The feather was that of an eagle, hawk, falcon, or duck, depending on Grandfathers story.

The third and last box was wreathed in mystery. Upon rare occasions Grandfather would let me handle it, shake it perhaps, but open it, never! My curiosity was so great that when alone in the house I would search everywhere for the box. Search as I might though, I never found it.