

## The Water Glass

By Charles Miess



I prefer the simple life. I have a penchant for functional things that are neatly organized so I can find them in the dark if I have to. I like to make sure that the open container of paint or pop or peat moss is empty before I open another. I don't like to make a shrine out of worthless junk from the past or from friends and relatives whether living or dead. Unfortunately, my wife Nancy does not share my preferences.

It wouldn't be so bad if the sentimental things were not all mixed up with those we use regularly. Why do we have to have Great Grandma Elsie's dented old cake pan, tea strainer, cookie cutters, and a half dozen more of her cheap antiques in the same place with the things we use every day? Why do we have to keep Grandma's thirty-year old spices and half-empty bottles of vanilla extract? Why does grandpa Jim's old pipe and can of stale tobacco have to be in front of the wine glasses in our kitchen cabinets?

Thoreau once said that all men lead lives of quiet desperation. He also said that desperate men sometimes do desperate things. Every so often I can't stand it anymore. I get in one of my cleaning, organizing, and throwing-out frenzies—often at great risk to the domestic tranquility. I toss out the stale spices, the rancid bottles of vanilla extract, and the dented cake pan. I pack away the garlic press and tea strainer and old cookie cutters along with Grandpa's old pipe and tobacco. I organize the cupboards and cabinets so I can find things, and so I don't have to reach around a hundred and one useless artifacts oozing with sentimental slop.

My basement workshop is one of my sanctuaries. I have shelves or holders for all my tools. My screws, nuts, washers, and other bits of miscellaneous hardware are all sorted into glass jars and neatly arranged on a shelf above my workbench. I try not to open a new can of 3-In-One oil until the old one is empty. I make sure that all the carpenter's glue in one container is gone before I open another. In one corner I have pieces of scrap wood all organized and stacked against the wall. In another corner, I have Plexiglas and Styrofoam panels arranged in order of size.

Everything in my shop is functional and useful—well, everything except for the *Garage and Tool Organizer* that has been sitting in the corner for sixteen years. It's still in its original box. The cardboard has rotted away at the bottom where it has been in contact with the damp floor and you can see rusty metal exposed. I never found a good place to mount it on the wall. I should get rid of it—but this is different. My son Adam bought it for me when he was only nine years old.

It was a cold December day when he told me to wait outside of the Valu hardware store while he proudly walked in with a fistful of hard-earned one-dollar bills and a pocket full of change. He knew what he wanted to get, and he thought it was the perfect gift for me. I wasn't supposed to see it when he came out, because it was my Christmas present. "Just pop up the trunk, Dad" he told me, "and don't you dare look." It was hard not to see it, though, with it sticking out of that undersized bag—but I never told him that. Nor did I ever tell him about the thousand times since that I've seen it standing silently in the basement corner—and the thousand times I stopped and remembered. Each time, that bittersweet memory was tinged with sorrow and a bit of guilt because I never had occasion to use his gift. So, you see, this is different.

My other sanctuary is the old shed. I have a workbench there too, with carpentry and metalworking tools neatly organized above it. Hoes, shovels, rakes, pitchforks, and other garden and farm tools each have their spot along the west wall. My snow blower has its own place alongside my daughter's bicycle and mine. Most everything is just where I want it, and right where I can find it.

Many years ago the old shed served as a milk house for Otto's dairy farm. I grew up down the road and worked on the farm each summer, never suspecting that I would one day own it. I can clearly remember

those sweltering days, flipping hay bales up on the hay wagon. I remember the sweat pouring from my tanned adolescent body and soaking my shirt and pants. I remember that incredible thirst that slowly built, and the sweet anticipation of a cold drink of water when we got back. My older brother usually drove the tractor with load of hay from the field to the barn. Otto and I would lie on our backs high up on the bales and watch the clouds slowly pass overhead as the wagon swayed gently from side to side over the bumps. Otto would sing, “Oh the sun was hot on Molly’s back; the sun was hot on me.” But my mind was not on Otto or Molly’s back or the hot sun. My thoughts were dominated by the milk house and the cold clear water waiting there for me.

A piece of iron pipe extended up out of the concrete floor in the milk house. A brass faucet was attached at the top. A stained tumbler sat quietly in a cast iron holder that was attached to the nearby wall. The water had the smell and taste of sulfur, and the tumbler that of stale chewing tobacco. But after I had worked so long in the hot sun, it tasted wonderful—better than wonderful—it was the nectar of the gods.



When I bought the farm twenty-five years ago, I didn’t let a lot of sappy sentiment stand in my way. I tore out all the old milk house paraphernalia and got rid of it. The only thing I kept was the milk cooler (because I couldn’t move it) and the water glass and holder (because I might need them someday).

Every time one of my throw-away frenzies extend to the shed, I dig through the boxes of miscellaneous junk and invariably throw out everything except that old water glass holder that is caked with paint and stained

with rust. The water glass it once held sits atop the milk cooler in front of a dozen neatly labeled cans of nails. I must have moved that glass a hundred times over the years to get to my nails. It’s just a cheap, 1940’s vintage tumbler with decades of dust and dirt inside and out. I don’t know why I keep it.



I was working in the shed not long ago when Nancy leaned out the door of the house and shouted, “Do you know where Grandma Elsie’s cake pan went?” I looked at that old water glass and thought about the times, a half century ago, when that vessel raised the nectar of the gods to my parched lips. I suddenly realized how much I treasured it. And I suddenly realized how much

trouble I was in.