

---

## What once we lost

Heather Grace von Stackelberg

### Abstract

Storytelling is inherently interdisciplinary for many reasons, but I think that one of the most powerful reasons is that stories can make metaphors come alive. Educational research has shown that metaphors are one of the best ways of learning new things; both individually and collectively, we understand new things in the context of things we are already familiar with. This story is all about making a metaphor come alive, to think about the loss of a piece of ourselves in different terms.

---

He was waiting when I unlocked the front door of the tiny little lost and found depot.

I laughingly call my depot a cranny because it isn't even big enough to be a nook. It's stuffed full of things lost and abandoned. But I know where everything is, I make it work.

The look on his face, I'd seen before. What he had lost was not just some hat or scarf, it was something much more important. But what I had in my boxes weren't hats or scarves, either. My little cranny was where people were sent, referred, directed, often subtly, when they really started feeling the loss.

"Hello, sir." I smiled at him. I can't always help those who come to me desperate, but I always want to.

His lips twitched slightly in the ghost of a return smile, but he didn't say anything, as if he couldn't bring himself to say something cheerful, or even pleasant.

Oh dear, this was bad.

I looked at him for a moment, considering. Then I nodded to myself. I knew where to start.

I went to my shelves of boxes and rummaged around. I pulled out a diaphanous piece of someone's lost Innocence. Was this his? No, it was far too feminine, it belonged to a woman.

I went a little further down, to a different box and pushed aside a couple Senses of Humor and gently scooped up a Zest for Life from the bottom. It hung delicately over my hand, giving off a light, sweet, citrus scent.

I brought it out front to where the man waited and held it out to him.

"Is this what you were looking for?" I asked.

He took a deep, gasping breath. His face was full of surprise and wonder as he carefully took it from my hand. He looked at it for a couple minutes, just stood there and stared at it, like he had never fully appreciated it before.

Which he probably hadn't. I smiled. This was a common reaction when I gave people back what they had lost. I saw this frequently, but it never got old.

Finally, he tucked it deep into an inside pocket, up close to his heart – another common reaction – and smiled at me. A real smile, this time.

"Thank you." He said. He had a nice voice, deep and rich. "Can I send other people I know to you?"

"You can try. They might not believe you. Or they might not be able to find me. But you can try."

He nodded, like he knew what I meant. He probably did. Turning on his heel, he strode off, a spring in his step. I watched him go, taking a few moments to enjoy the warm glow of satisfaction.

I was doing a little sorting and organizing, just puttering around and looking busy, mostly, when I realized that a young woman was standing just outside. I wondered how long she had been there, just looking and not saying anything.

---

"Oh. Hello." I said. "Can I help you?"

The young woman didn't say anything, just gave me a vague combination of a head shake and shrug.

She was dressed nicely, like she was an office worker, her hair styled, and makeup expertly applied. But there was something off. I looked closer.

"Oh!" I couldn't help but exclaim out loud. This woman had lost her Innocence, except... she hadn't lost it, it had been taken from her. Violently.

"Oh." I said again, but this time it was in compassion. It had to have been painful.

I really, really wanted to help her. But how? When things are taken rather than lost, they almost never end up with me. Usually, they get held up as prizes to be gloated over, rather than languishing in one of my boxes.

And especially for Innocence, ones that were merely lost can sometimes be found and returned, but ones that were taken – especially violently– couldn't be. But this woman so desperately needed something...

A thought struck me. Maybe...?

"Stay right here," I told her, "I think I have something for you."

I hurried back into my little storage area and rummaged around a bit. It had been quite some time since I had seen it, and even longer since it arrived here; it had been here longer than I had.

Ah, there it was. With some difficulty, I disentangled it from the other items in the box and pulled it out. It was a Sense of Purpose, heavy, solid, like iron. And it wasn't just hard, it was spiky with anger, rage, even, of injustice that needs to be righted. And it was old. A civil rights activist? No, older than that. A Suffragette, maybe? Even an anti-slavery activist? That seemed more likely.

---

Hefting it, I went back out to the woman. She put her hands out automatically as I held it out to her, but as soon as I put the weight in her hands, she took a deep breath, her eyes widening.

"Oh!" She said.

I couldn't help but smile. That was my line.

"Oh!" She said again. Her cheeks flushed, only making clear how pale and lifeless she had looked before. "What is this?"

"It's yours." I said. "It was waiting here for the right person, and obviously that's you."

"What- what do I do with it?"

"Whatever you feel you need to. I can't tell you more than that."

"This... isn't what I came here for. What I expected."

"I know. I can't give you back what was taken from you but take this instead. It won't exactly fill the void, because it isn't the same thing, but it may make the void easier to bear. And it may help prevent some other girl from having to go through what you did."

"It's... heavy."

"It always will be. And people around you won't like that you have it and will constantly tell you to put it down. You can. You always have that option. But then you'll go back to being the woman who came here, looking for something you can't get back."

She nodded slowly, looking at what she had in her hands, a thoughtful frown on her face. A couple minutes later, she turned and walked away, cradling the Sense of Purpose gently in her hands, like an egg.

I smiled, but it wasn't the happy smile I had before. These were the cases that, though satisfying, made me worry a little about what I had set loose on the world.

I returned to my shelves and boxes.