

The Collection

By Joanna Bawa

The collection is exquisite. Silver Victorian pill boxes, each created by the same designer, carefully engraved, tiny beads, curlicues and flourishes flowing across the small surface. The lids are enamelled, bright colours surviving the years, bucolic scenes blooming and languid heroines swooning.

Each is a treasure, but the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. Or at least, it would be, if I had a whole.

The collection comprises twelve pill boxes, and I have only eleven. Incomplete, each piece is pretty but weak, struggling for recognition. Complete, the collection would be a symphony of style, colour and shape, a single entity of great beauty. The missing twelfth offends my sense of completion, niggling at me night and day. It obsesses me, leading me on trip after trip to antique stores, each further away than the last, to pleasant but fruitless conversations with fellow collectors and dealers, who admire my tenacity but have nothing to offer me.

I sit with my father one day, demented and frail in his care home, uncomprehending. Nurses bustle nearby, plumping pillows and speaking in too-cheery voices, dishing out tablets and water glasses, offering me tea. My father's neighbour gazes blankly at the wall, fumbling for something in the pocket of his ratty red velvet robe. As I watch, he produces a small box. A pill box. Its shape fits the gap in my head. Could it be? Opening it, he takes a single pill from it and swallows it quickly. I hold my breath. As he replaces the lid, I can see that yes, the colours blend with the colours I have, the designs continue the story I can never finish. This is the final piece, this completes the collection.

The old man puts the pill box back in his pocket and nods off. Soon after, I take leave of my father and press my lips to his mottled old skull.

On my next visit, I learn from a nurse that the old man in the red robe became agitated, even frantic the day after my visit. Patting his pockets and shuffling his few possessions, she tells me, as if to find what lay beneath them. This curious behaviour yielded no result, and shortly afterwards he simply stopped, took a long breath, and died. Very sad.

Very sad indeed, I concur, but perhaps there is beauty in a story which is complete.

At home, my own agitation is calmed, my symphony perfected. The collection numbers twelve, another story is complete.