

Description: “Holding Treasures,” by Nidhi Thomas, tells the story of a young boy who learns he has been diagnosed with a life-altering condition that prevents him from practicing a hobby that is beloved to him, painting. The peculiar disease prevents him from participating in his craft without transforming into the tools needed for painting themselves. His story is one about growth, acceptance, and persevering in a world where the only one who believes in you is yourself.

Title: Holding Treasures

Author: Nidhi Thomas

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A disease of the kin,  
the physicians concurred,  
inspecting him,  
tapping him like a fragile shell,  
while his mother’s eye twitched,  
startling acceptance in them,  
resigned to mourn the loss of an unfounded desire,  
to mourn also, perhaps, the loss of her son.

And he felt it when they released him—  
his parents—  
from the clutch of former affection.  
Felt it when they sat him down,  
gingerly rubbing his tingling hands,  
hot tears falling on cold ointment,  
informing him about what he must lose  
to resist the transformation.  
Felt it when they tinkered with his easel,  
disassembling the abode of his dear paintings—  
thinking themselves sly,  
hiding under the veil of late night.  
He had rose to watch,  
heard his treasures thump as they hit the bottom of a box.  
Then, followed the outline of their retreating forms,  
haggard and worn.

He abandoned a hearty plate,  
full and steaming,  
at the breakfast table in the morning—  
to agonize his mother and astonish his father.

Later, a soft hand at his cheek,  
the former fretted, and he frowned in her face,  
asking after his treasures,  
remaining resolute despite her watery eyes—  
bleary from life

The feeling of being guided to a chair  
vaguely touched him,  
lucidity weak alongside the foreign feeling of ire  
building in his gut.  
But before he could wail,  
his father started to speak wistfully  
of days long passed,  
of when him and his mother  
had longed for their treasures too.  
Once, his mother had been enamored by wood,  
carving and sawing till the nights end,  
ready with gifts to delight a friend.  
One day, she loved it too much  
and woke up to find  
that her fingers were made of wood!  
Father himself had loved to garden,  
but he dared not continue,  
too weak to entertain the idea  
of a leg that spit out seeds.  
They had both stopped loving  
and now lived with ordinary limbs.

But their grave words didn't reach him.  
Insistent with his love,  
he wandered over the fence,  
and under a tree,  
around a web of stars,  
and against the dusky ground,  
until his fingers twitched,  
finding specks of gold in a bed of silver,  
reacquainting with the shape and feel  
of creations old and coarse,  
raging at the sight

of dried paint on bristles,  
promising himself to his craft with stiff, remorseful hands.

The rhythm of his days changed,  
the weight of his treasures burdening his body,  
monotony falling from the same back on which disapproval climbed,  
the favor of others a fickle thing.

Those companions  
who loathed to play ball when he wasn't on the field,  
now walked beside him with awkward feet.  
Those who never had his acquaintance  
now looked on at the bristles protruding from his feet,  
the wet, sludgy color exploding from his hands,  
and walked away with sour faces.

He danced everyday,  
springing from spot to spot,  
on the sidewalk—  
under the shade of the magnolia tree—  
drawing lines and filling them with vibrance,  
embracing the ache in his leg and wetness on his arm.  
But old men still coughed and young men scoffed,  
and then he'd quiver close by,  
seeing red and feeling blue,  
anguished state muddling his mind,  
yielding haphazard splotches  
that ruined the dazzling picture before his feet,  
warranting a waning dance and hovering limbs,  
urging him to do nothing but blink in defeat,  
to retreat,  
a hesitant hope whistling in his chest  
that they'd love his treasure tomorrow.

Swathed one day  
in a sweaty warm bundle,  
head peeking out like an overflowing teacup,  
he stared out a starless sky,  
cloudy and still,  
yearning to be embraced,

by those familiar white dots.  
He absorbed its despondence  
and stretched, determined to right it,  
letting bright, white flecks spout from his palm.  
Skybound, they fluttered up and out  
and wonderment promptly erected his slumped form.  
But as the hungry sky grew complacent,  
chastising him with its big, dark stare  
for adopting a leisurely pace,  
his beloved specks dropped ungracefully like dying birds,  
resentment pooling in his core,  
flooding it,  
drowning it,  
drowning him,  
his pain a channel for failure.  
For no one wanted his treasure  
but the useless sky.

Desperately berserk,  
clammy hands pressed urgently at the window's ledge,  
startled eyes trailing close behind—  
prepared to gauge the night  
and assure them with knowledge  
of what their white magic had become,  
ready to relay devastation.  
But right outside,  
the boy's magnolia tree wasn't dull.  
Instead, it glowed indulgently,  
warm in the presence of a nearby streetlamp.  
Warm as well beside  
the pleasant tremors of a flowing harp.  
And above them the white magic fell,  
loose and graceful,  
slow like melting candy,  
to rest finally  
on the harp's brown, smooth head.

Equally sluggish,  
the harp gained consciousness,

rising and growing,  
gaining flesh and skin!  
Becoming nothing more  
than the little boy was himself,  
lanky and small,  
but mighty to a fault.  
Their eyes connected,  
one pair beady and the other gentle,  
an unspoken invitation carried within the other's gaze.

Rolling in this reverie,  
he slid,  
smoothing himself down with paint-slick hands.  
He followed,  
being pulled by the white, stilted one,  
brushing, with the other one,  
against the magnolia tree,  
sighing in bafflement,  
seeking a face,  
wanting to know,  
wanting to see  
the weirdness of himself  
reflected in another.  
Wanting to confirm  
that others dared to love  
their treasures too.

And suddenly his thoughts were stolen,  
his senses caught and thrown far.  
The world left him  
as bareness teemed before his eyes,  
dry cement  
calling out to him.  
He set his eyes  
on his company  
finding something wise  
in steady eyes.  
A voice echoed as it spoke. "I've been looking all this time."  
It hit him like drums,

the weight of it. "Have you?"

And he had.

Had been searching

for a connection

under that tree,

pouring his heart out

on the sidewalk.

The boy was staring at him.

He stared back.

And then they both moved.

On the floor,

he pushed and smeared,

hummed and surveyed,

thoughtfully,

calmly,

painting beautifully,

as a harp pulsed by his side,

melody inspired

by his steady glide and slide,

watching and listening and creating,

each twang in harmony,

it seemed,

with the musician's heart.

All while the sound

centered his own heart,

feeding it peace,

nourishing his will

to illustrate his mind.

Then when the night ended,

two figures stood in bliss,

breathing in the music-stilled air,

thoughts hazy and pleasant

under the rising sun.

The harpist began to dig at his pockets,

pulling out fresh paper,

eyeing it,

imagining maybe,

a melody it could depict.

Papers rustling, he turned to him,  
unadulterated joy  
in the slope of his smile.  
The boy smiled back,  
nodding slowly,  
a matching expression  
capturing his face  
when he saw  
that before his feet  
laid a painting he loved:  
a harp and a tree  
and curious white specks.

Reminding people  
to cherish their dream,  
to hold it on their head  
and wear it fearlessly,  
to be sure to  
let it grow  
before it can wither,  
to cup it tenderly  
like fresh, spring water,  
to always believe  
that passion  
is no infraction.

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