

Holding on to Nothing

All that remained was a tiny, brass key. Jane had held and pored over it so many times that she was surprised it hadn't disintegrated from overuse. As her eyes travelled over the familiar edges, she wondered for the thousandth time what it meant. The key must have led to somewhere once, but Jane had no way of knowing where. All she knew was that the key had belonged to her mother, and maybe keeping it would make her feel as though she belonged too.

Jane was an orphan. She craved acceptance, yearned for love, but found they were rare treasures in the life of one lonely, little girl. Time unfolded and foster families passed Jane along as though she were a piece of furniture. She was loved when convenient and discarded as soon as difficulties arose. Jane never threw out anything: she needed some kind of constant in a rearranging, shaky, unsure world.

The third home was nestled in the heart of the country, across from a babbling stream. On Jane's first night there, her foster sister taught her how to choose the nice, flat stones and skip them across the gleaming surface of the water. Even after the laughter and joy faded, Jane remained at the water's edge and slipped a small pebble into her pocket. The rock contained happiness; it trapped the hope that was so hard to find. And it was hers forever.

Jane's next foster father was a referee, and when she watched him at work she felt so proud that she thought she might burst. Her father thought little of the spare red whistle he gave to her one day, but a thrill coursed through Jane as she clasped the tiny token in her hands. Then the whistle had been shiny and new, and Jane had cherished the first real gift she had ever received. She blew it until the sound became strained and off key. She blew it long after she had switched homes again.

By this time, Jane had compiled all her treasures into a small plastic bag. She brought the parcel everywhere with her. The mere thought of its presence guaranteed safety. *She had been loved once. Someone had paid attention to her. She had belonged.*

Jane grew from a worried child into a withdrawn young adult. She wanted to let others in more than anything, but she didn't know how.

When she was 19, the power went out in Jane's apartment. Although the room was pitch black, her eyes eventually became accustomed to the dark. It was the same as in life- you could get used to any situation, it seemed, no matter how bleak. An hour later, Jane ventured into the corridor and her eyes widened in surprise. Although not a single person was in sight, the hall was lined with candles, sparkling like beacons in the night.

The warmth spreading through Jane at the brilliant display was overwhelming. As usual, she wanted to capture that mysterious joy, to bottle it somehow so she could find her way back to it again. Blowing out one of the candles, she placed it carefully inside her plastic bag. But just as she turned to go back into her room, she stopped. Something inside Jane rebelled. Something inside her was tired of admiring and remembering. Something inside her just wanted to live.

Jane cradled the bag in her hands with utmost care, and stared at the objects that had come to mean so much; the objects that defined her...

After a moment's pause, Jane dropped the bag onto the ground and headed out the door. As she hurried down the stairs and emerged into the world, the light pierced through the darkness in which Jane had been cloaked. The shedding of these garments was like a peeling away of skin, of the layers of Jane's heart that had been hardened over years of struggle. *I'm free*, she thought with a smile. *I'm free at last.*