Honors LA 10

Short Story Format

**Instructions**: As you hear/read the following story, consider what is it that makes it fit into the “Short Story” format of an oral history. Also, reflect on what the author did especially well, and whether you have any suggestions for improving it further.

Shards, by Carl Svaren

My grandmother was born in 1929, eight months before Black Tuesday and the subsequent collapse of the world economy, and a decade before the beginning of a conflict which became the bloodiest this planet has ever seen. Her entire childhood was spent in the shadows cast by the Great Depression and the Second World War, two tragedies which collectively claimed the lives of one hundred million people. One hundred million sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters.

And my grandmother’s story is but a shard of those millions and millions of lives shattered like vases. After my great- grandfather lost his job at a lumber mill in Bend, Oregon, my grandmother’s family, never wealthy, became impoverished to a degree almost unimaginable today. They bounced between Washington, Oregon, and Northern California as my great-grandfather looked for work. They moved so often that my grandmother attended thirteen different schools between the ages of six and fourteen.

Her father sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door and her mother, like most married women at the time, stayed at home taking care of the children, in this case, my grandmother and her brother. Her father made barely enough to ensure his family’s survival. A can of tuna stretched out with breadcrumbs would be food for a week. New clothes, professional medical care, and Christmas presents were unattainable luxuries.

My grandmother says that her suffering was unnoticed by her in her childhood, as most of the children around her were in similar, if not worse, situations. But it deeply shamed my great-grandmother, who had grown up in a wealthy family. It so shamed her that she tried not to be seen doing any of the tasks that would show her poverty. She always cleaned up and put on her best clothes and a hat before leaving the house. Whenever her children accompanied her, she insisted they be presentable. No torn clothes or dirty faces. Nothing broadcasting the poverty that she was so ashamed of.

So, one morning in 1934, my great-grandmother, wanting to avoid being seen returning milk bottles for a five cent deposit, called for my grandmother.

“Jacqueline! Come here! I have a chore for you,” she called.

Jacqueline came running from outside the run-down house.

“Jacqueline, I need you to return these bottles to the store for the deposit.”

“Yes, Mama.”

My grandmother was handed the milk bottles and rushed out the front door. She passed other children, in dirty, threadbare clothing like her own, playing marbles and tag. She knew some of these children, none well, as there was no point in making friends when her family would, in all probability, be moving again in no more than a couple months. As she walked, slightly melancholy, she swung the bottles in the air. They would occasionally meet, making a faint clicking noise.

After a few blocks, my grandmother entered one of Bend’s wealthier neighborhoods, where the mothers would stare disapprovingly at her from the windows of their well-kept houses, and the children playing in the street would avert their gazes. Where the older children in cashmere sweaters and pleated skirts and slacks would walk by in clusters with textbooks under their arms. And my grandmother walked, one bottle tapping the other, until one broke on impact. It shattered, and she stepped on one of the glass shards now underfoot. Her foot now bleeding profusely, my grandmother limped several blocks back towards her house, not expecting the help of the disapproving wealthier neighbors. She screamed and screamed for her mother.

“Mama! Mama! Come help!”

Her mother came running when my grandmother was just a couple blocks from the house. She scooped up my grandmother in her arms and carried her, as fast as she could manage, and with her daughter’s blood staining her clothes, back into their worn-down, dank rental house.

She set my grandmother on a salvaged chair in the dining room and hurried into the kitchen. Once there, she grabbed a rag and used it to blot the blood from my grandmother’s profusely bleeding wound, all the while telling my grandmother “Don’t worry, Jacqueline. All will be well.” My grandmother says she later realized her mother was just as afraid as she was. She had no better idea than her daughter how to treat such a serious wound. So, realizing the rag was failing to halt the flow of blood from the gash, she grabbed my grandmother’s foot and squeezed it in, according to my grandmother, a “vise-like” grip. Even so, it was nearly an hour until the bleeding subsided and a week until my grandmother could walk without limping again.

Amongst her plethora of childhood memories, my grandmother says she remembers this moment for two reasons. Firstly, it marked a rare occasion when her mother acted by pure instinct, without a care as to what others would think. Caring only for her daughter and not mourning her lost status. Secondly, and more importantly, as one of the few when her mother’s icy façade melted. The emotional chasm between her and mother, which had existed throughout her life, and continued to exist for much of the remainder, collapsed, if only for a moment. And it is because of that that my grandmother fondly remembers this day as a island of security in the sea of peril that was her childhood.