A Thimble of Love

By Caroline Hamilton

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Like the ancient parlor game I learned as a little girl, I hold tight to what I was finally given

When I was a little girl spending Christmas at my grandparents’ house in North Carolina, we played a game called “Who Has the Thimble?” While the adults were still sitting around the mahogany dinner table, my grandfather would catch my eye and wink, signaling me to grab a thimble from my grandmother’s sewing drawer.

The game was a variant of duck, duck, goose. The person who was “it” walked around the table clasping the thimble. Everyone else held his or her hands in prayer position, making a sliver of an opening into which the thimble-carrier might drop the prize.

“Hold tight to what I give you,” the thimble-carrier said to each person, pretending to drop the thimble into his or her hands. I sat tensely, always hoping it would drop into my palms, but it rarely did.

Then we all began guessing: Did my Eagle Scout cousin, Harris, who could walk on his hands, have the thimble? Did one of my glamorous aunts, with freshly manicured fingernails, have the thimble? Did my
grandfather, whose Parkinson’s made him a bit too shaky to really play, somehow have the thimble after all? Sometimes I’d hear the clink of tin on a gold ring, and realize that Uncle Hugh had the thimble.

One by one, each family member who was guessed burst open his or her hands saying, *Nope! Not me! I do not have the thimble!* Sometimes you could guess around the whole circle before the dead last person finally raised his with the shiny thimble on his pinky.

After college, I moved to New York, where I came to compare the thimble game of my childhood to my love life. Dating was a game of looking and guessing, praying that my future husband had been delivered to my circle by a playful nymph, and all I had to do was go find him. Amid the clamor of subways and crowded bars and neon-lit offices, I was straining to hear the clink of love against my life. Could love in the North be as simple as a family game in the South?

“Keep shining your light,” my best friend, Lily, told me over $25 macaroni one Saturday night in the West Village. But looking around at the other tables in the trendy restaurant, it appeared that the whole city was made up of romantic couples and “girls’ nights out.”

I dated doctors, musicians, vegetarians. One prospective boyfriend explained to me over a dinner of roasted goat how he liked to go jogging in the park. Barefoot.

“Oh,” I thought to myself as I walked home alone, not sure if I was cringing over the thought of a rusty nail or another lukewarm date.

I forced myself to believe that I was in the circle with the thimble, that it was just a matter of time. But as the seasons passed, the circle got larger and larger. I worried that I would run out of time. Or guesses.

One autumn night, I went to a pumpkin carving party at a friend’s house in Hell’s Kitchen. It started off particularly hellish: I rang the wrong doorbell and stood outside for half an hour. Even then, I was too early and watched uselessly while the hostess heated pigs-in-a-blanket. Three hours later, as I was writing off the evening as another booby trap in my scavenger hunt for love, he appeared.

He was coming from work, late, in a suit and tie. He was six-foot-five, maybe 180 pounds. His nickname was “Lanky.” Immediately I liked him: the way he looked at me, the way he asked questions, his energy. You could tell he was awake-smart, look at you across the table and “get it” smart. I guessed by his sweet brown eyes that he’d probably had more relationships with chocolate Labs than New York City girls. And best of all, he was from North Carolina. We only spoke for ten minutes, largely interrupted. But when I went to leave, he jumped off the couch to say goodbye.

I left the party feeling like I’d found the thimble.

After a Wilmington wedding, one in which a hurricane pounded down on our Manhattan guests, Lanky and I moved into a brownstone on the Upper West Side, just a few blocks from my old single-girl apartment. As I walk down Columbus Avenue on my way to work these days, it is easy to remember the gambler I used to be: moving briskly toward the subway in a new dress; looking, wide-eyed, in every direction for my thimble; imagining the cool press of it in my palms so vividly that my open hands ached.
My grandfather had not been steady enough in his last years to circle the table with the thimble saying, “Hold tight to what I give you”; instead, we tiptoed around him. I wish I could lean close to him again. Tell him I found something good, and I am holding on.

Caroline Hamilton is a writer in New York. She studied creative writing at UNC-Chapel Hill and received her MFA in non-fiction from The New School. Her work has been published in The New York Times and The Charlotte Observer. She is working on a first novel.