

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz

Figurine



One of my neighbors had a cabinet full of porcelain figures which her mother-in-law had given to her. My neighbor remarked on how fine and valuable they were. She needn't have mentioned it because one could see at a glance the fine craftsmanship that went into making them. The figures might have been at a party in colonial Virginia dancing the reel, dressed in lace-lined fabric that seemed to be in motion with the sway of their turn to the dance. Their delicate faces were as finely done with the flush of motion on their cheeks.

I remember saying to Lyn one afternoon as we were driving along the Niagara Parkway that, exquisite though they were, I had no desire to own something like that—they were breakable, after all, and would always be shut away in a cabinet, albeit a glass one, and I'd always be worried that something that fine would be easily damaged. Dusting them off every two years, might cause one to be broken. I was very happy to see them in someone else's cabinet.

"Except," I suddenly remembered, "when I was a child, my mother had a figure of a girl that sat on our fireplace mantel. If I ever saw that one at a garage sale, or something, I would want to buy it."

The figurine was of a yellow-haired girl wearing a pink dress and standing barefoot on a tuft of grass while holding an armload of daisies. Some of the flowers fell to her bare feet as her dress blew in the breeze.



For some reason, as a child I had identified with the girl—who knows why or how children pick up those fancies. I did look something like her with what my parents called my strawberry blond hair. One day, however, when I was about nine or ten perhaps, the girl was suddenly gone from the mantel. I asked my mother about it, and she had simply given her away.

My mother had an unusual relationship with *things*. It came, I'm sure from being orphaned at the age of nine and hearing everything she had ever known in the world, everything that connected her to the world, auctioned off as she sat alone on the back stairs of the home she would never see again. In addition, my father didn't like what he called, "dust collectors." The figure, however, had been one of the few things that occupied an honored place on the mantel swathed in the light that came in the many windows in that home on the corner of Maryland and Highland Avenue in Gaithersburg. She was there smiling in the sunlight as we read, opened gifts on holidays, visited with special guests.



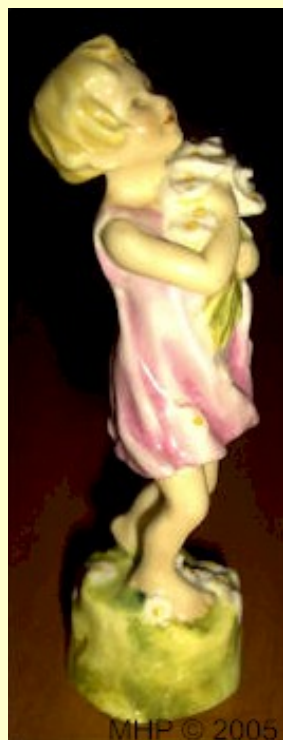
It was strange and sad to have her suddenly missing, never to be seen again.

It was about six months after the drive on the parkway that Lyn and I were visiting the city of Bath in England and strolling around the old streets with Richard and Ursula that I happened to turn and glance into the window of one of the many shops on Quiet Street, and there she was. I hadn't seen her for many decades, and hadn't thought or spoken of her in almost as long except for that one afternoon on the drive. She looked exactly as I remembered her. If I had been looking in the other direction at equally interesting shops, I never would have seen her.

I felt the way you do when you're in a dream and need to yell, but your voice doesn't respond. Finally, I could speak, but all I could say was, "Lyn, that's it! That's the figurine I was telling you about!"

It took awhile to explain to everyone what I was talking about and longer to find out more about the figure since the proprietor of the shop was out to lunch. When we returned to the antique store, we learned that the figurine I prized was one of a set called *Children of the Nations* made by Freda Doughty for Royal Worcester. "My" figurine was England.

The first question was whether to actually buy the statuette. Those figures were the cheapest things in the store by a long way, and they were hundreds of pounds—not dollars—apiece. People like me who were raised by parents who came of age during the Great Depression were conditioned to think carefully about buying items that are at once costly and very fragile, especially when they had to survive a trip across the ocean. It didn't seem sensible.



The second question was the date. I was absolutely sure that the figurine I remembered had been on the mantel when I was very young, but the proprietor said that this one was made when I would have been seven years old. Richard speculated that someone may have given it to my parents because it looked like me when I was seven. Even though I liked that idea, it didn't seem that it would have been the case.

I gave myself a day to decide about whether to purchase the item, so the next day at lunch, Richard and Ursula were asking me whether or not I was going to buy it. I still didn't know: it seemed like a frivolous thing to do. Then Lyn asked if it were time for his opinion yet—and said no question, we should buy it.



So off the four of us went, back to Quiet Street.

The second question was partly answered by a book, *Royal Worcester Figurines*, Lyn found on-line. Freda



Doughty made this figure from 1934 to 1959. The one we purchased was made later in the period as indicated by its *Backstamp*. The question was answered definitively when I came across some old photographs taken in my childhood living room. Though faint, the figurine was clearly there on the mantel, and the snapshot was dated when I was a toddler.



For all the agonizing I did in the twenty-four hours of debating about whether or not to get the figurine, I have never regretted the purchase, and surely would have regretted letting the chance slip away.