

A Gift From Mother

Pat Capps Mehaffey

With dread, I anticipated the full blast of dry, body-baking heat in the attic. Already I felt it escaping down the stairway as I climbed the narrow steps. July 1980 was unusually hot in the small West Texas town of Anson.

Slitting the strapping tape on the first dusty box, I remembered the day I packed, labeled and stored the boxes in this attic on a cold, snowy day in 1968. Mother had died a few weeks previously and her house needed to be emptied because the new owners wanted to move in immediately. I gave the tools, furniture and furnishings, and clothing to the appropriate persons to be cherished and enjoyed, or maybe not, as they chose. The remaining items had no monetary value, yet Mother considered them her most treasured keepsakes.

I packed quickly on that long-ago sad day, only glancing at the diaries, birthday and Mother's Day cards, letters, telegrams, newspaper clippings, delicate handkerchiefs and gloves. Mother considered herself not properly dressed unless she wore a hat and gloves and carried a hanky in her purse. Struggling with tears, I put all her treasures away out of sight.

Now my three nieces planned to arrive soon for a visit and I wanted to share Mother's treasures with them. With their father dead, I would share his keepsakes equally among his children. At last, after all these years, I felt emotionally strong enough to

that correcting them often takes more energy than I have left." Gene

examine each item and read each word of correspondence. Many of the cards, letters and clippings pertained to my nieces' families. I knew each one would find special pleasure in reading them, and in having some of Grandmother's gloves and handkerchiefs.

Parting the cardboard flaps, I reached for the first tissue-paper-wrapped object, and memories rushed to my mind for I held a pair of barber's scissors. The eight-inch blades were still the same cold, blue-black steel but Mother's fingers had worn away most of the shiny coating on the handles. By angling them to the light, I read "Simmons-Howe Co., Inc – Germany."

Recalling with clarity how Mother valued her special scissors, a longing for days past washed over me. Mother often said, with great pride, "Child, these scissors were a free gift when your daddy and I purchased a Home Comfort Range in 1928. I loved the stove, too, but it had a steep price tag."

Sitting on the floor among the boxes, I clearly saw Mother on Saturday evenings cutting Dad's hair, my brother's hair, giving haircuts to the seasonal hired hands, neighbors and anyone else who asked for cuts or trims. Several had beards and she shaped them, too. My nieces and I wore Buster Brown haircuts with bangs straight across the forehead, and Mother fretted that the bangs grew too fast even though she cut them short.

"I'm surprised you don't bump into the furniture," she commented. "I know you can't see where you're going."

One day when I was about 10 years old, the nieces' fast-growing hair and Mother's special scissors combined to cause me to get a spanking. Often I carefully observed Mother as she cut my nieces' hair. Confident I knew just how to do it, I draped an old sheet over each niece's shoulders in turn by age, and cut everyone's bangs off at the hairline, thus saving Mother a lot of time and trouble. For some reason, Mother did not appreciate

this act of kindness. In fact she promptly went into what can only be described as a “hissy fit.”

Another vivid memory was the day Mother caught me using the scissors to cut out paper dolls. She delivered a long lecture about how cutting paper dulled the blades and we must never ever use the hair-cutting scissors to cut paper.

Occasionally, the scissors appeared lost and no one could rest until they were found. She always sent me out to the porch to look, in case I had sneaked them out to cut paper dolls again. We all swore our innocence and, thankfully, each time the scissors were found again.

Mother spent her last few years as an Alzheimer’s patient. As the disease advanced, she lost the ability to speak sentences. She no longer remembered nouns. Even though she could not converse with anyone, she still asked for her scissors by opening and closing two fingers in a snipping motion.

Recovering from my reveries, I unpacked all the boxes, making a stack of memories for each of my nieces and one for myself. I tried to return each item to the rightful giver and divide all the treasures equally. Guess which of the four stacks received the scissors?

Yes, I still have them. Mother’s cherished barber scissors received many years of use, and I learned to cut hair quite well, because I had three little girls of my own, whose bangs grew very fast.

Memorial Day

Sharon Fish Mooney

*for Thomas Lewis Fish,
1908-1985*

A plumber and a carpenter by trade,
you fixed old ladies' toilets in our town,
hammered together boards to fill our home
with shelves and chairs and tables square and round.
You never talked much to your wife, or me,
your daughter, who grew up an only child.
I used to marvel at your silent world
until the day I found the letters piled
away inside the cedar chest upstairs;
letters from army bases in the States,
others from London, England, Paris, France.
Your other life I now appreciate
as I begin to read between the lines,
interpret actions influenced by that war,
remembering now on each Memorial Day
the flag you carried, purple heart you wore.
You marched in the parade route on our street,
shared memories with others of like mind
who fought in battles that I never knew
existed, yet for you those ties that bind
us to the ages past were true and strong.

I read your letters over just once more
and look between the lines into your heart,
catch glimpses of the gentle man you were.

The Linen Press

Becky Haigler

A tall pine cupboard with smooth-sanded doors
Holds my grandmother's dowry of linens:
Shelf upon shelf of crisp, white fabrics,
Starched and ironed;
Folded with love, precision, and tissue paper.

Fancywork of lace, cutwork and appliqué
Fashioned by caring hearts and hands.
Years of lady-like pastime
Stitched and snipped
By circles of women enweaving their dreams.

Creases, threadbare from years of folding,
Mark tea-stained tablecloths and cuptowels,
Tear-stained pillowslips and blood-stained sheets;
Scrubbed and bleached
Till only the stain of memory remains.

Inheritance

to Aunt Maggie

Patricia Cochran Murrell

I remember your barn loft,
smelling of Bermuda bales,
mice, and summer solstices.
Sunlight-spangled dust motes
slant-shined through timbers,
aged there like a good woman.

In the lane, I climbed
onto red oak limbs above the pig parlor
and learned to leap
onto a bag swing, plunging
past fear – down and out
over blackberry vines
and water moccasins —
soaring,
bare toes stretching
into blue-bleached Louisiana sky.

We shelled purple hull peas
under the sycamore until our fingers
turned royal
and you stored the gold
of a thousand ears of field corn.

us for ourselves, without rebuke or effort to change us, as no one in our

Together we have camped
in mountain pastures
and calmed horses crazed by lightning,
waded pools so clear and cold
we saw our yesterdays
darting like minnows
in the shadows.

z

These memories you have given me
along with ripe tomatoes
and a sense of family – a knowing
that strong women are heirlooms,
handed down like quilts and tucked
around the edges of our lives.

Prayer and Pie

Carrie McClure

The soft folds in grandmother's face
look like the dough she kneads
with strong, floured hands. I watch
eagerly, my thin frame pressed
against the counter; silent, while she
forms the gooey mound into fine crust.
As she shapes it, she mumbles quiet
prayers. In the mixture I catch
the mention of my name. It is good
and sweet, like the rich custard
she pours into the perfect shell.

entire lives has ever done, not our parents, siblings, spouses, friends -

The Quiet Man

Peter Goodwin

She cherished the memory
of her gentle father,
who would never argue
with her mercurial mother.

He was a quiet man
reluctantly putting on his hat
and going for a walk
until his wife calmed down

She never mentioned
the time he put on his hat
went for a walk
and never returned.

Dinner Bell Days and Katydid Nights

Betty Wilson Beamguard

My grandparents were neither rich nor well educated, but I loved spending time with them. At their Tennessee home, with its patched roof, sagging floors and mismatched furniture, Mom E. and Granddaddy would welcome us with open arms.

Wearing a colorful apron over a cotton dress, Mom E. served fried chicken, cream-style corn, field peas, cornbread, iced tea and peach cobbler. On Sunday afternoons, we crowded around her painted wooden table with aunts, uncles and cousins crammed so tightly into the narrow kitchen there wasn't room to squeeze past the chairs. Not that I wanted to leave the table early. I loved listening to the banter and stories.

From the time we were ten and twelve, my sister and I would spend a week with them each summer, gladly giving up air conditioning and an indoor toilet for a week in the country. Each morning at dawn, the rooster crowed and we climbed out of bed to wolf down bacon, scrambled eggs and clabbered-milk biscuits dripping with melted butter and Karo syrup or homemade preserves.

In my grandparents' bedroom stood an out-of-tune piano with yellowed keys where the family gathered at Christmas to sing carols. I sat for hours trying to play the sheet music left by

small child, the perfect granddad is unafraid of big dogs and fierce

my youngest aunt: “Croce Di Oro,” “The Wayward Wind,” “Love is a Many Splendored Thing.”

We enjoyed ringing the dinner bell, but a mild ding is all we were allowed since ringing it long and hard was the equivalent of calling 911. My sister and I would fight over the privilege of working the screeching pump handle to get water. We all used the same gray water in a small pan to clean our hands and drank from a dented aluminum dipper hung on the side of a bucket filled with clean water.

For fishing, we dug earthworms from the manure pile next to the barn and threw them into a rusty coffee can. With cane poles sticking out the rear side window of the car, we rode to a neighbor’s pond to catch four-inch sunfish and bluegills.

To pick blackberries, we had to slather bacon grease around our ankles, knees, waists and the tops of our legs—the places chiggers prefer. We tramped through weeds as tall as we were, watching for snakes as we held our pails upright to avoid spilling the berries. Mom E. didn’t mind if we ate a few, since not all of hers made it to the bucket.

With no TV, Mom E. entertained herself by working the word puzzles she found in the paper and listening in on the party line. Each time the phone jingled, she rushed to the wall to pick up the ear piece. She’d turn to us, put her finger to her lips and flash us a mischievous grin. As soon as she hung up, she filled us in on what she’d overheard.

We’d follow Granddaddy to the woods to get the cows each evening and tried our hand at milking. Although I have no desire to sit in a steamy barn again with a cow stomping dust and whapping me with her manure-gunked tail while I try to squeeze milk from her rough teats, I cherish the memory.

At night while we listened to country music station WSM on the radio, we colored, played Authors and Old Maids, or cut up Spiegel catalogues. My sister and I slept on a bed that folded

down from a huge mirrored cabinet in the sitting room. The feather mattress billowed around us, bringing unwanted warmth and the occasional prickle. A window fan whirred next to the bed, but loud as it was, it failed to drown out the throbbing drone of the cicadas and katydids.

The weekly trip to town was always an adventure. Mom E. would dash into her room, pull off her dress, and stand in her petticoat patting herself with a powder-laden puff. She'd don a fresh dress, run a comb through her white hair and smear on bright pink lipstick. Then she'd slip her arm through the handle of her black pocketbook and call, "Y'all ready to go?"

The four of us piled into their old Chevy oven on wheels. Mom E. cranked the engine and roared off, barreling smack down the middle of those narrow, rutted roads, creating a cloud of dust. While Granddaddy slumped on the passenger side with his straw hat pulled over his eyes and his elbow stuck out the window, she leaned forward, squinting into the sun.

Even on blind curves, she held a steady speed. On the rare occasions when we'd meet another vehicle, she'd yell, "Git over on your side of the road, you danged fool." She'd honk the horn and roll along with two wheels in the ditch. Those on the right side of the car found themselves dodging briars and limbs. Granddaddy would yank his arm inside and tell her what he thought of her driving. Then he'd pull a can of Raleigh tobacco from the bib pocket of his overalls and roll a cigarette to settle his nerves.

Mom E. and Granddaddy didn't have books for us to read or trunks crammed with corsages, scrapbooks and yellowed party clothes, but their house was filled with laughter and stories. They added love and color to our lives, and we always knew we were welcome in their home.

Will and Testament

Ann Howells

You sit at the kitchen table, deep
in some new novel you've discovered.

I contemplate mortality. Will leave
to you my walnut chair, rockers chamfered
with lullabies and time. Diamond lavalier
passed down and down and down
this matriarchal line. And, rosebud china,
one cup chipped, carried from New York
by horse and wagon two hundred years ago.
These things are your heritage, but
I long to leave you something
more useful. You, with your predilection
for weather. You, who conjure thunder
and ice. I leave what we've shared: egrets
dazzling overhead like whispered prayer,
sunsets framed in the kitchen window,
frogs that chant through sleepless nights.

You sweep hair from your cheek,
an unconscious gesture, and I smile.

Granny's Cedar Chest

Lee Ann Sontheimer Murphy

Although the brass trim has tarnished over the decades, the wood of my grandmother's cedar chest retains a soft, warm glow and the faint scent of cedar wafts upward when the lid opens.

A treasure trove of family heirlooms lies within the cedar chest and my own talismans mingle with Granny's keepsakes. The worn baby shawl with hand stitched edging is there beside a candy tin filled with dime store jewelry that a young Hazel Hayward wore when she was a telephone operator.

Yellowed clippings and brittle photographs capture fragments of lives and preserve moments of the past. I can open any of the albums and thumb through to watch my own life unfold in Kodak clarity.

There are too many items to count, to tally but there is one artifact that is most important because it sparked my career as a writer and sustains it.

The manuscript is fragile and the ink is faded, the ink that was once stark, fresh black on new pages written over with great care. One corner of the faded manuscript remains tied with a red ribbon now softened to a dusky pink by time. I can read the title and the entire work with ease although my fingers handle the precious paper with a light touch so that I do not destroy my Granny's one work as a writer, the Class Prophecy she penned in 1912.

Class prophecies were the vogue in the year that the Titanic sank beneath the waters of the north Atlantic and hers was written in the flowery, delicious style of the times. Most graduating classes had one, the work of a single student that attempted to foretell the future of their classmates.

Written in the first person, my grandmother's work lives and breathes life into the long dead youth who finished school with her that spring. I was fourteen, little younger than she when I first read it. Then, as now, I was awed by the power of the words, the unknown gift of my grandmother.

My own yearning to become a writer came early and I scribbled stories as soon as I learned how to hold a pencil. As a teenager, I hoped that someday I might write words that could touch others but it was a secret dream I kept close.

Granny knew me, however, almost as well as her own heart and so she opened the cedar chest to reveal that old manuscript. I read it with amazement, unaware that the grandmother who wore aprons over her house dresses, the woman whose hands were gnarled and worn with years of toil had once shared my dream.

Dust motes floated in the afternoon sunlight that filled the bedroom that my father once shared with his brother and tears burned in my eyes as I asked why she had not become a writer.

"I couldn't." Her words were soft spoken and simple but they spoke volumes. She couldn't; she had gone to work soon after that eighth grade graduation. By the time that the World War involved America, she had been a telephone operator. Later, after dial phones eliminated many operators, she went to work in a hospital laundry, a job she held until soon after my birth. She had also raised three sons, sent two of them off to World War II, and buried a husband. She married again in an autumn romance to my beloved Pop, the grandfather connected to me through love if not blood.

grandchildren must have been out of town." Gene Perret ~§~ "One of

I stared at this remarkable little woman, unable to speak but she could.

“I couldn’t but you should.”

Her words were both benediction and challenge. It was a gauntlet tossed down to spur me and it has. Had she been able to attend high school or college, she might have become a noted writer but there is no “might” or “could” in real life. She had not but I could.

My dream had once been hers and on that day the torch was passed from one generation to another. I made a promise that I would not marry until I finished my education – high school and college. And, I made a vow that I would strive to take words and make them sing, that I could succeed.

The road to becoming a full time writer has been long and filled with obstacles but when tempted to falter, I would remember that manuscript, that dream and press onward.

Granny’s cedar chest now graces my living room. Within its’ burnished depths, that manuscript remains, testament to a dream and foundation to my career as a writer.

She couldn’t but I have – because of her dream.

The Dress

Mary Krauss

I sit alone in the attic room
safe from clamoring siblings
lulled by new spring rain pattering the roof
and quiet smells of past lives.
I reach for Grandmother's wedding dress,
holding it to me
running hands over satin and lace
breathing cedar smells from its resting place.
I dare slip it on
looping many buttons
and tiptoe down to Mother
with creamy fabric
trailing the stairs behind.
She looks up at me
and smiles.