

From early childhood, I knew that the large cardboard box tucked into the back of my mother's closet was special. And, although my brothers and I were never hesitant to violate our mother's private space, we never touched the box, knowing somehow that it was sacred, not to be disturbed.

I'd come upon it now and then, when seeking a secret place away from my brothers or when looking for the perfect pair of shoes to wear with a dress-up outfit, but I never touched it. Not once.

After my dad died suddenly of a heart attack, when Mom came home to live with us, the box came too. It traveled in the car, away from any movers' mishandlings, and was carefully placed in the back of her new closet. We moved two more times before settling into the house where my husband and I would rear our children and where my mother would die. Each time we moved, the box found a new but familiar home in the darkest corner of Mom's bedroom closet.

The last time my mother was hospitalized was Mother's Day in 1978. She was admitted on an emergency basis to open a blocked bile duct. During the procedure, the doctors found dozens of tumors growing inside her. We knew, then, that she had lost her hard-fought battle against stomach cancer, begun less than two years before.

Now, she told us, it was time to go home and take care of business. And so she did.

The Box

*by Myra J.
Christopher*

A final trip to Texas was spent visiting family and friends and favorite places, saying good-bye. When she walked off the plane in Kansas City three weeks later, I saw the cruel speed of illness at work. Her new dress hung loose and her skin was translucent. Although it was late spring and already hot in Kansas City, she asked me to turn on the heater in the car.

I knew, then, that the end had begun, but I didn't speak to her of my overwhelming sadness. I was afraid that if I spoke at all, I would cry. She understood my silence and let it be. For the next few weeks, we tried to pretend that things were normal.

Summer recess started, and the girls began swim team and softball practice. Mom tried to do the things she had always done, but every day she had less and less energy. From nightfall to morning she seemed smaller, weaker, more frail.

On a bright afternoon in the middle of June we took a fold-up chaise lounge, an ice chest with wet wash cloths, an enormous jar of iced tea, and an umbrella, and went to the ballpark for our ten-year-old daughter's championship softball game. Filled with determination, Mom cheered the team on to victory. Later, exhausted, she rested in my husband's arms as he carried her to the car.

Later that night, after everyone had gone to bed, she thanked me for all the special arrangements — the tea and the lounge chair and the cold cloths.

"I loved today," she said, "but I don't think I will go again."

And for the first time, weary and worn from a child's softball game, we sat together and talked about her impending death.

In the following days, it was increasingly clear to me that Mom was actively dying. She began to spend more time in bed, and finally gave up her cotton dresses for robes and gowns and the comfort of the large pillows on her bed. Her face was too narrow now, her eyes too large, her hands too long for her pencil-thin arms. I dreamed one night that while bathing her, one of her hands snapped off her wrist.

Our lives fell into a routine that centered on

Mom's needs. Before leaving for swim team, the girls sat on her bed and talked about their friends, their games, their lives. They told her what day it was, what the weather was like, where they were going, and when they would be home. Each evening my husband reported the day's news to her and shouldered responsibility for groceries and carpools. I spent my time caring for her, bringing meals on a tray, holding the cup of water to her lips, and sitting in silence with her lovely hands resting in mine. During the night, I slept lightly, listening for her sounds from the intercom system we bought at Radio Shack.

I thought of many things those days as I sat beside my mom's diminishing form — of my Texas childhood, family outings, the generous loving of my mom and dad. But it wasn't until a warm day in July that I thought again about Mom's cardboard box.

"I would like your help tomorrow," she said to me. Her voice was steady and clear. "It's time to go through my box."

That night, I sat with my husband and cried. I knew now that her death would be soon. That night, I dreamed about my grandmother's funeral.

As soon as my husband and children left the next morning, I crawled in the back of her closet and pulled out the box, brittle now from age. With great care, I lifted it onto her bed.

"You know," she said, sensing my wonder to see the mysterious contents, "There is nothing of material value here; this is a box of memories —"

And as I sat beside her on the bed, she pulled her memories out of the dusty box, one by one, and shared each of them with me.

There were childhood treasures — my grandmother's wire-rimmed glasses, my grandfather's thick shaving mug and brush, and there was a scrapbook filled with bits and pieces of her life. It was filled with gum wrappers, wooden ice cream spoons labeled carefully with the date, the place, and with whom she had shared her ice cream.

Valentines were pressed carefully onto pages beside invitations to slumber parties, picnics, ice cream socials. There were yellowed notes that

spoke of boys and teachers and young-girl crushes, notes that had been secretly passed among friends in class. Everyone loved my mother, and now I knew that it had always been the case. A report card proved what I had always known, that my mother was smart.

I fingered her grade school commencement program and read the words to the graduation song she had sung with her classmates so many years ago. And then I listened as she remembered the tune and sang it softly to me.

Each page brought new memories to dust off, stories to tell. Each brought laughter and tears.

From the bottom of the box I carefully lifted pressed corsages, ribbons, the tail of a kite, pictures, and laid them side-by-side on the quilt. There was a picture of Mom and two college friends dressed in pleated, baggy trousers and sweaters, their feet propped up on a Schlitz beer truck. This picture, she confessed, had been well-hidden from my grandmother who taught Sunday School at the First Baptist Church for thirty-five years.

I learned from a newspaper clipping that my uncle, a high school agriculture teacher, had been kidnapped by bank robbers in the era of Bonnie and Clyde. I wondered aloud why she had never shared this exciting tale, and she told me it had been too frightening and violent; some things, she said, are best forgotten.

Time slipped away from us as we journeyed together through those years. We finally stopped for lunch, and Mom fell asleep with a peaceful smile on her face. Later that afternoon, we started our "work" again, piece by piece, memory by memory. The journey through the box took us two days and all the energy my mother could muster.

There were love letters from my father, which she read and did not share, then asked that I destroy them. Unused rationing stamps from World War II for sugar and butter were attached to the newspaper announcing VJ day. The crayon drawings brought back smells and memories of my years at Jefferson Davis Elementary School.

There was a Kennedy campaign button, a bundle of letters my brother had written from Viet Nam. We talked about how difficult that time had been, and she asked me to give the letters back to my brother.

My father's duck call was wedged in a corner, beside his wallet with everything in it that had been there the day he died. His lambskin Masonic apron was there, too, and Mom confessed she was supposed to have buried Dad in it, but she had forgotten to do so and had always regretted it.

Later, as the box finally emptied out, Mom rested back into the pillows. Now, she said, it's time for you and me to talk together about my funeral.

She was sorry that it would be complicated to get her body back to the small Texas cemetery where her parents, her brother, and my father were buried, but that's what was to be done. The funeral should be short, she said, because she didn't want her family and friends to be out in the Texas heat. She talked about scripture readings and favorite music and asked that we sing "Amazing Grace" and another old hymn, "Morning Has Broken," which had been sung at my father's funeral and at the funerals of my grandmother and grandfather.

"It's to remind you," she said, "that life goes on."

A wooden box would do for her coffin, she said, and reminded me that yellow roses were her favorite flowers. She told me what she'd like me to wear to her funeral and mentioned that a few weeks before she had ironed a white dress shirt for my husband and had hung it in her closet.

We both cried — for this life spread out before us on the soft quilt, for the love that passed between us, for the grief of separation. We cried and we shared and we spoke of our love.

One week later, early one morning before the day had begun, my mother died in her sleep.

