

Memory's Sweet Scent

My grandmother's cedar chest has become part of my story

BY MARY O. PARKER

The flirty smell of cedar never fails to deliver me to the sun-speckled walls and dancing window sheers of my grandparents' bedroom.

It transports me to special Saturdays where, after a morning spent playing dress-up, I'm sitting at the edge of my grandmother's cedar chest brimming with a sense of adventure. I'm wearing a pair of her shoes and her pink shell necklace with matching earrings.

Together, my grandmother and I are about to unearth the chest's contents and become wayfarers through time and mutual heritage.

As she lifts the lid, the sweet fragrance wafts up and sweeps me into its arms. There, at the very top, is a quilt made by my grandfather's mother, who died when he was 3. We spread it across our laps and take in the mishmash of patterns. Soldiers live on many of the triangles, attired in purple and blue, the words "Position at parade rest" in red underneath them. Other triangles sport polka dots and gingham patterns, and one even has what looks like a ship's blueprint with all its parts labeled. My grandmother explains that the fabric came from flour sacks and that in the early part of the 20th century many a thrifty Texas farm wife used the sacks to make a variety of items, from underpants to quilts.

She sifts through the chest's contents until she can lift out a stack of papers and photographs. "This was my little sister, Bessie," she says handing me an item she's culled. "It's the only photo ever taken of her."

I know of an Aunt Dot, an Aunt Gradie and an Uncle Sherman, but an Aunt Bessie? Yes, my grandmother nods, and then tells me she died at 7 of malaria. At the word "malaria" I somehow feel as if my family has crossed paths with the exotic, and I am secretly thrilled.

The pink shell earrings are beginning to pinch, but when she pulls out the next item I am so enamored that I become oblivious to their irritation. Against her, she holds a dress of turquoise blue with curtain-like fabric, and it animates her. She's no longer simply my grandmother, but also a beautiful lady sitting beside me on the hardwood flooring. "The first time I put this dress on," she shares, "I finally felt all grown up."

My sore ears hear this strangely for, in spite of now being able to conjure her in a different light, I cannot envision her as anything other than grown-up. She sees this in my eyes and puts a marriage certificate into my hands, pointing to the space

where it lists the bride's age as 16. I steal a look at the groom's age of 23 and audibly inhale.

"That's part of why my parents weren't too happy when I eloped with your grandpa," she explains. "He was also a little bit of a troublemaker." It is during this beside-the-cedar-chest interlude when I first learn that my grandfather has a scar cross his abdomen from a knife fight. The vision is tough to reconcile with the man who at his troublemaking worst teases us grandkids by telling us, "If y'all on't quit that spattin', the blue goose is gonna get you!"

From the stack she pulls a picture of him in his Civilian Conservation Corps days. He is seated on a rock and is incredibly handsome, fresh and undaunted.

Later, as an adult, I learn that in Texas, many of those in the CCC were taught woodworking skills and often made cedar chests. It was then I realized that, in spite of all the childhood moments spent with my grandmother taking in that sweet scent and the stories of what resided within, I didn't know the story of the chest itself.

It turns out that my grandfather didn't make the chest in the CCC. The real story is more romantic. Knowing how much she'd always longed for a cedar chest (her poor cotton-farming family couldn't afford one), he'd bought it for her as a 9th birthday surprise.

The story of my grandmother's cedar chest has become part of my story and now that she's no longer living, it lives with me. There have been additions in the course of my own journey, among them the multicolored afghan my grandmother crocheted. If you lift up the afghan to let that memory-inducing aroma come out to play, you'll find a pink shell necklace with matching clip-on earrings lying underneath.

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