

The Spice Box

Myra Christopher

When I was nine, I gave my mother a box of Red Riding Hood Suckers for Mother's Day. My older brother, already a teenager, laughed at me and called it a "baby gift."

Mom tried to soothe my injured spirit and said Red Riding Hood Suckers were her very favorite kind. But being the only girl sandwiched between two brothers made me especially vulnerable to teasing, and I was humiliated. So when Mother's Day came around the next year, I was fiercely determined to get Mom something "grown-up." No baby gifts this year.

Dad took me shopping; he understood how important it was to me to find just the "right" gift. We went to the thrift shop, and even my brother couldn't comment when Mom opened the carefully wrapped, perfect present — a thick, milky-white porcelain spice box. A thin, red line wrapped around each compartment and printed below in black letters were the German names of each spice: *zugar, saltz* . . . It wasn't that my mother had an affinity for things German — she was of Scotch-Irish descent, and, more importantly, a fourth generation Texan. But my gift to her was "foreign," "sophisticated," and I knew it was the perfect gift for the person I loved most in the world.

Years later, living in Germany, I realized that my mother's spice box was in every shop, on every shelf, in every home. As common as a toaster. It didn't matter. To my mother it was a treasure from a foreign land. Clearly, it was light years beyond Red Riding Hood Suckers.

I don't remember what I gave Mom for her last Mother's Day. A few days before the spring holiday she had been rushed to the emergency room. For two years, she had battled valiantly a rare form of stomach cancer. She had undergone two savage surgeries and chemotherapy that nearly killed her. Now, the battle was over. The cancer had won, and she would soon die. Perhaps within six months.

Doctors had been able to open the blocked bile duct, but when they got inside, they found tumors crowding out life. Her surgeon said it was as though someone had thrown a shovel of gravel at her; everywhere a pebble hit, a tumor grew.

"I want to go home to die," she told us.

And so it would be. My girls were six and ten, and they would be a part of this with my husband and me, a part of their beloved Geemah's dying.

The doctor agreed as well, but said she had to get stronger before we could leave the hospital. But she would, and then she would die in our home. A few years earlier, my dad, fifty years old, died suddenly of a massive heart attack in our family home, a home rich with memories of our growing up years. Mother would die at home as well.

After Dad was gone, Mom moved in with us, but when my husband decided a few years later to buy a business and move our family to Kansas City, I wasn't sure she would come with us. She was, after all, a rancher's daughter, with roots deep in Texas soil. But I pleaded with her to come, to help us settle in, to help me take care of the babies. We promised her we'd take her back if she didn't like it; we'd buy her a Texas condominium and visit often.

Who knows now what would have happened? She packed up her memories and came to Kansas City because she knew I needed her, and a few months later, she was diagnosed with cancer. A surgeon we barely knew announced that with chemotherapy, he believed Mom had a fifty percent chance of living for two years. The option of moving back to Texas was never discussed.

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Instead we moved ahead into this new life shadowed by the future. We sought normalcy in the children's schools, PTAs, dinners together, and fixing up the house, including the redecoration of a 1930s kitchen badly in need of paint.

Following this last surgery, the doctor thought a couple of days in intensive care, another couple of days "on the floor," and we could take Mom home. After three surgeries, we knew the drill: kinked intestines, adhesions, bowel blockages, bleeding ulcers, adverse drug reactions. And finally home.

I dropped the kids at school that day, two days after mom's surgery, and rushed through morning traffic to the hospital, thinking she'd leave the ICU that day. Mom always had problems the first day out of ICU. She hated being in intensive care and always tried to hustle the doctors and nurses to get her out as quickly as possible.

I wondered what was ahead for us and what our lives would be like without this woman who had been the heart of my life.

The nurses' station was my first stop.

"We'll move her to the floor later today," the nurse assured me.

When I turned into mom's cubicle with the good news, her back was to me and her head was quiet against the pillow. She's sleeping, I thought.

I watched her for a long moment, her shape small and still beneath the sterile sheets. I wondered what was ahead for us and what our lives would be like without this woman who had been the heart of my life. I walked softly to the other side and moved the chair closer to her bed. It was then I saw the tears running down her cheeks and chin and gathering in a widening circle on the hospital gown.

"Mom, do you need a shot?"

She shook her head no.

"What's wrong?"

The only sound was the hum of the machines.

"Mom?"

Finally she looked up. She smiled slightly but there was a touch of embarrassment in her voice when she spoke. "It's the kitchen," she said. "I want to see it again."

The medicines and tests and ICU had taken a toll, and Mother was afraid she would die without seeing the results of our planning and hard work.

We had started it several weeks before, not expecting Mom to be back in the hospital so soon. It couldn't be a big project; we didn't have time, energy or money for that. But it would be a special one, with high-gloss, architectural-white paint applied to old, tired cabinets, and vinyl flooring discarded to reveal hardwood floors, refinished and shined.

We planned it from Mom's old *Better Homes and Gardens* magazines. While thumbing through back issues, I remembered the German spice box I had given Mom those many years before. She remembered it, too, and the idea was borne of trimming the freshly painted cabinets with a continuous thin red line. At the bottom we'd place clear black letters announcing the contents of each. Just the day before the emergency hospital trip, we had found the perfect letters: four-inch, black, vinyl letters. We bought enough to name all our kitchen treasures — GLASSES, CHINA, BASKETS, PLATES, WINE GOBLETS, BEER MUGS.

But that day mother was in the ICU, miles from the nearly finished, bright new kitchen in which she had taken such delight.

I could never bear to see my mother cry. If she wanted to see the kitchen, we would find a way to see the kitchen.

When I approached the two nurses at the desk to tell them I wanted to take my mother out of the ICU for a short ride, their replies came quickly and vociferously.

"No way!"

"She's too sick."

"The doctor would never allow it."

The doctor in question was one of many specialists who came and went. He had the final say, the nurses explained, because he happened to be the admitting physician in the ER the day my mother had come in. "Hospital policy," they said, placed him in charge and they knew him well enough to know he would never discharge her for a few hours.

"It's not a discharge," I explained. "It's a field trip."

And then they began to listen — to the story of the spice box and the kitchen, to my mother's fear of not seeing the newly painted cabinets and the bright new floors again. They listened when I questioned requiring permission from

a man half my mom's age who didn't know her and whom she didn't particularly like.

They listened with smiles, understanding, a touch of excitement, and then they came up with a way.

AMA — "against medical advice" — would require us to sign a waiver relieving the hospital of any responsibility, but we could then leave the hospital.

When I explained it to Mom, she thought AWOL fit better than AMA, and we both laughed. For the first time since the surgery, the spark came back to her eyes.

Soon the two nurses were at the bedside. "All right, let's get you home," one said and they began efficiently clamping tubes and disconnecting monitors. They gave her "one for the road" — an extra pain shot — and left an IV line in with saline solution dripping through it.

We wheeled Mom out into a beautiful spring day, clear and cool. A nurse took off her sweater and wrapped it around Mom's shoulders. "You'll need this," she said as she helped her nest into the back seat of the car, tucking pillows beneath and behind her and handing her one to hold tightly over her tummy in case she had to sneeze or cough. "Preferably don't do either 'til you get back," she teased. We hung the saline solution on the coat hook, waved good-bye, and headed home.

I drove carefully, knowing by the grimace on her determined face that even slight jostling hurt. But soon we were there, and when I saw her face as she looked at the cupboards and the floor and the neat black letters, I knew it had been worth it. Our tears came in unison.

She rested awhile on the sofa in the family room, and we reminisced. We talked about Red Riding Hood Suckers, about Dad, about my two brothers. She extracted a promise from me to try to keep my brothers close to one another. And she talked about the warmth of the sun on her back and the coldness and glaring brightness of the ICU.

She tired quickly and soon we knew it was time to go back to the hospital. But first, there was one more stop she wanted to make — the Quik Trip for a cherry Popsicle for her, a grape one for me. It was a tradition begun many years before in memory of my dad who had invented the mold for the double Popsicle.

A short while later, we pulled up to the hospital entrance, tired and triumphant. But as I wheeled Mom through the double glass doors, our smiles faded. There, rigid and red faced, was the "admitting physician."

He faced my mother first, questioning what she had been thinking; then immediately, without waiting for an answer, turned his rage on me. Veins throbbled in his temples. "Don't you realize she could have died while you were out on your 'little trip'?" he yelled. "You could have *killed* your mother!"

But Mom had had enough. Her tolerance for people treating unkindly those she loved was minimal.

She gathered what strength she had and forced his eyes to meet hers.

"You poor little fool," she said. "Haven't you figured out yet that I am dying?"

Without another word, he was gone, his white coat flapping against his thighs as he disappeared down the hall. We never saw him again.

A few days later, just slightly off schedule, Mom came home. There were a few more good times ahead: an end-of-the-year picnic at the girls' grade school; a final girls' softball game; a last garden club meeting, and time to say good-bye to new and old friends. Mom also gave me instructions for special gifts for the girls' sixteenth birthdays and what to do with her jewelry. We had time to sit on the patio and eat summer watermelon and peaches — pureed but still delicious. We reconnected with characters on the soap opera, *Guiding Light*, one Mom had watched when I was young. Our minister — her "real doctor," as the kids called him — came often and prayed with her, once sending the Twenty-third Psalm booming through the house over the forgotten intercom. Neighbors brought food, and friends took the kids to swim team every day.

Although only six and ten years old, the girls grew up a lot that summer. Both entered into the care of their grandmother; the youngest massaged lotion into red spots Grandma developed on her skin at pressure points. They filled her room with stories of activities and friends and kept her aware of the day, the week, the time. My husband got up with her at night, read the newspaper to her, listened to me cry, and took responsibility for the children's activities and housework. And I devoted myself to my mother.

When she slipped into a coma, my brothers and their wives came, and I prayed for her death.

Mom died peacefully in her sleep, and then we took her home to Texas.

She is buried in a small cemetery on what was then my grandfather's ranch, now known as Oak Grove Cemetery. Her husband and her mother, her father and brother are there, too, buried beside her. It's not like city cemeteries with marble mausoleums and lawns groomed for croquet, with markers so flat and smooth the mowers roll over them without damaging their blades. Here white-faced Herefords graze nearby and there isn't a blade of anything but Johnson grass inside the chain-link fence that encircles the graves. In the summer, the most frequent visitors are grasshoppers and horned toads. The old one-room church is gone now, but the piers are still there, reminders of what was. A red crepe myrtle bush at my mother's feet is there, too, planted years ago by my grandmother. This is a place where I played as a child, a place where my grandfather "tended the graves," a place where I feel content and at peace.

It has been twenty years since my mother died, and I still miss her terribly. I have cried for her at two high school graduations, two college graduations, one law school graduation, one wedding, and on every Mother's Day since her death. But I don't despair. Shortly before she died, my mother sensed my fears. "Myra Jean," she said, soothing them away, "always remember that no matter what happens, a loving parent is never very far away."

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Oak Grove Cemetery, Kerens, Texas

Photograph by Donna K. Blackwood