

The Memory Chest

It was a rather large thing, so large in fact, little five-year-old Abby could have crawled in and fit comfortably inside, had she felt the inclination. Right now, however, she did not. She was feeling a terrible, childish disappointment. Perhaps a boy might have been thrilled at receiving such an old, mysterious looking chest, but little Abigail Smith had been hoping for something quite different from her grandfather. A doll, or a brightly colored picture book, or *something* else more special or interesting, as Grandfather had always been known to bring. She could feel tears coming to her eyes, and a pout forming on her lips as her grandfather looked thoughtfully at her.

“Do you like it, Abby-girl?” he asked, smiling.

Abby’s young eyes could find nothing *to* like about it. Disappointment soured her judgment. Some, however, upon looking at the chest might think it rather intriguing. There was an air of sweet nostalgia about it that could only be seen if looked at closely. It had the looks of a thing that contains many memories- sweet, bitter, wonderful- it could tell, if only it could speak.

It was clearly old, but had been tenderly cleaned, polished, and looked after. It looked just like what a child might think a pirate chest should look like: metal bands, an old-looking (though polished) lock, and thick, smooth cedar. Little designs carved into the wood added to its charm: vines running up and down the four corners and along the rim and a sun carved on the top of the lid with the phases of the moon circling around it. It even smelled delicious, the cedar giving off an old odor of mystery and nostalgia.

It was just the sort of thing that might have delighted her before that day, had she not

been so sorely disappointed in it as a birthday present. On any other day she might have run to it, begging to open its lid, convinced that if she did she would find treasure inside: whether it be gold and jewels, or voluminous gowns and ruby slippers, or pixie dust and dancing sprites. But, in her despondency, she took an instant and vehement disliking to it.

"Its been in the family for several generations before even my time," Grandfather went on gently. "We have all loved it in our own way, and all of us used it to store the things most precious to us. I want you to have it now, Abby-girl. Fill it with your treasures, just like I did."

"I don't like it," Abby pouted.

Her mother scolded her, but her grandfather, who was older and wiser, just laughed and said simply, "Oh, I think you'll learn to like it someday, Abby-girl. Someday."

After the party was over and the adults were cleaning up, Abby's father carried the chest upstairs for her to her room and asked her where she wanted to put it.

"There," she said disdainfully, pointing to the farthest corner of her bedroom. Her father shrugged and sighed, but put it where she had directed.

That night, in a final act of vengeance, Abby dumped all the other birthday presents she had not liked inside and closed the lid. She locked it with the key her grandfather had given her and crawled into bed. But as she gazed across the room, the chest seemed to stand out to her, like a sore spot in the room. She pushed her covers aside and then dumped a blanket over it, and on top of that stacked all her stuffed animals and various dolls to further hide the blight on her peace of mind.

"Goodbye to all that," she declared with satisfaction, as she had sometimes heard her mother say. She then crawled back into bed, smugly satisfied that she had won part of the battle, and fell asleep.

Thereafter followed a pattern that sadly lasted for many, many years to come; in this way, Abby found her own use for that chest. Before it had held happy things, or at least useful, wanted things. Now it held all that was unwanted, all that was hurtful, or that she wished to be forgotten.

When she was seven, her brother made fun of the fact that she still slept with a teddy bear. With tears in her eyes, she pushed off all the things that had buried that chest and threw the poor teddy bear in, along with several other items that had collected by then. When she was eight, she wrote a short story about a little bird that she showed to one of her teachers, who was sadly not kind or sensitive, and called it silly and juvenile. Mortified, she crumpled the paper up and threw it in the chest when she got home, slamming the lid shut as she did so. At thirteen she put in the picture of a fairy that had hung on her wall for years. There went the old CD albums, and her grandmother's old apron. Anything that bothered her, but that she could not quite bring herself to throw away, went into that chest. Many times it was slammed shut in bitterness. Many times it was left for weeks without being thought of or touched. It gathered dust, just as it gathered the air of something old and forgotten.

Soon after Abby was sixteen years old, tragedy struck, and an atmosphere of mournful, heavy silence fell on the house. Abby often threw herself on her bed and cried, and it seemed as if she would never smile again. Finally, one time after crying for quite a while, her eyes fell on the covered chest in that small corner, and a hardened resolution built up in her heart. She quickly began gathering things from all around her room that reminded her of her mother: the book she had given her, the little porcelain ballerina she had bought on a outing with her, and the framed picture of her. She opened the chest and put all of these (more gently than usual) inside. It hurt to do it, but it hurt worse to see those things every day and...be reminded. She didn't know how else to help herself heal. Since by now the chest was so laden with things that she could not

carry it by herself, she had to get her older brother to help her carry it upstairs to the attic. There he left her as she stood, staring at it, for some time after.

“Goodbye, Mom,” Abby said softly, at long last. She turned and left, with one, just one, backward glance.

The chest was hardly ever visited after that. At first it was too painful, and then it just became habit for her. And perhaps, in small ways, bit by bit, she was learning and growing a little wiser, and needed her chest of painful things less and less. Whatever the case, there came a time when the chest was visited for what Abby thought would be one last time. She quietly opened the chest and put in the flower her father had given her for her graduation. Then she left the attic and left her home. The chest lay in the corner of the attic for a few more years, being forgotten and unused, for even when she would come home for a visit, she never went up to the attic.

One day, about five years after Abby had last gone to the chest for what she had then thought would be the last time, she came slowly up the attic stairs. She was more worn, perhaps, than the last time and certainly, at that moment, her eyes were more sad. She pressed her lips tightly and quietly went over to that little dark corner carrying a bundle of small clothing and a few pictures of a little baby in a hospital bed. She opened the lid of the chest and set the things gently inside. She closed the lid just as gently, but this time, and for the first time ever, she did not lock it, but left the lock hanging open. She did not get up right away, but laid her head on the lid for some time.

“Goodbye,” she whispered to the wood. When she got up, her eyes were a little more red than before, but somehow they were clearer. She left quietly, without a backward glance.

Months, seasons, years pass without her return, mostly because she felt she never had a

reason to. It was not that she didn't have ups and downs in her own life and home, but she had grown and learned to live with her own memories, and she did not need to bury them in an isolated corner any longer. She forgot, for the most part, about that chest in the attic at her old home. Only the occasional memory of it or its contents would come to her mind, but they no longer had their sting, and soon slipped quietly away.

One day, decades later, a much older and much more worn woman entered the attic. Her hair was almost all gray, and wrinkles covered her skin, but there was a light in her eyes that hadn't been there when she had last entered that seemed to make her almost look young again. She went softly over to the corner, and stood before the chest for some time, looking at it with clear, soft eyes. She finally bent down, took off the open lock, and lifted the creaking lid. She stayed there long after the sun had reached its high point and had begun retreating from the attic. She pored over old books and notes, laughed over old pictures till she cried, hugged her old teddy bear and stroked her grandmother's apron. She sat in a pool of memories, memories that had lost their bitterness and now had become sweet. Things that had been cast away like trash had now become treasures she wouldn't trade for gold and jewels.

At long last, her worn hand reached the bottom, and there was nothing left in that old chest but dust. She was almost regretful. She sat there for a long time, just gazing around her, then smiled, her face wrinkling, and she got up to close the lid. But then, one last thing caught her eye. It was a slip of paper that had got stuck in between two of the bottom boards. She bent over the edge of the chest and tugged it out and looked at it. Suddenly, tears filled her eyes once more, this time spilling over.

Dear Abby-girl,

You may not be able to read this now, but I want you to have this note to remember why I gave this chest to you. You're life is just starting. Like your life, this empty chest is yours to fill with what you will. I hope they both will be just as full of 'treasures' as mine were.

With love, your Grandpa Mason.

Abby suddenly realized that it was just as full and overflowing with 'treasures' as anyone's could have ever been. She had thought, when she had first begun to think of the chest without pain, that it had taught her how to say goodbye to the bitter things in her life. Now she knew it had taught her to welcome both the bitter and the sweet.

Abby's daughter was mystified when her mother, with the help of her husband, came down the stairs carrying a large, heavy, cedar chest. Abby had him set it down in front of her five year old granddaughter, who was looking at with a puzzled frown.

"What's that for, Grandma?"

Abby answered with a smile. "It's for you."

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