

Cardboard Suitcase

by Misti Rainwater-Lites

I was never your favorite. It stung when I was five but all these decades and bruises later I understand why you sat in your recliner with a cigarette in one hand and a Coors in the other and looked at me with those disapproving eyes.

"When I was a little girl I didn't have a home. I walked with my sister from door to door carrying a cardboard suitcase, asking strangers, 'Can I live with you?'"

I could imagine it. I could believe it. We weren't close but I still dream of you at least once a month and I sleep in the bed that once belonged to your second daughter and before that belonged to your first husband's mother. You are the star of my first memory of blood. You were cleaning out your second daughter's (my maternal grandmother's) refrigerator and I was teasing Suzette, your horrible white poodle. You told me to quit. You warned me that she would bite. I don't know why I didn't listen but she did, of course she did, she bit my pinkie and it bled and I howled and you did not sympathize.

I was thinking of you just now after I shot off another e-mail to another stranger. I'm winging it, always. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm begging for an audience. If you could see half of what I've done you would dismiss me with "tacky" and that would be the truth. I've been doing this thing for a while now where I show up in my tacky dress and tacky shoes and do my tacky dance and count the seconds until I'm dismissed. But I continue to knock at the door of The Most High. I think he knows my name by now.

When you were dying in a hospice bed in the living room of the only home I've ever really known, the only one I've been returning to since before I could walk, your daughter (my grandmother) asked

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you if you wanted me to read the bible to you and you said, "Not unless she really wants to." I really wanted to so I did. I read about the gates. All those jewels to look forward to. And when you died I wasn't there but everyone said you smiled and raised your paralyzed left arm with such grace. There are no atheists or agnostics in our family.

December is always the hardest month for me. After attending your funeral that April day I puked up strawberries and didn't stop puking for nine months. I wanted my daughter to be like you, a Sagittarius goddess with fire in her eyes. When she was born my hands and voice were weak and shaking from the epidural but I sang Christmas carols to her until my throat was raw. It's on VHS so that someday she would have proof. That's the second time I ever saw my dad cry. The first time was at your first husband's funeral. "Papaw Crenshaw was my hero," he told me, standing there in his cowboy hat and boots and sunglasses. But the December day he said goodbye to me in the hospital he kissed me and he kissed my daughter and he said, "Someday we'll all be together in Glory." And I thought, "The worst part of my life will be over soon and I can bury my heart, finally, and never feel anything ever again. Numb. I just want to be numb until the day I die." I signed away my rights and I was wrong. I still haven't achieved numb. I cannot imagine it. I cannot believe it.

Last December I told my mom, your favorite, that I needed to make the trek to Bomarton someday and visit the graves of my paternal grandparents. Then I heard from my brother that our dad had said something similar so I called him and we made the trek together in his truck. I guess that's the closest I'll ever come to a vision quest. We expected sleet and snow but instead we found a cemetery pocked with rattlesnake dens. It was too cold for snakes so we had the place to ourselves. I didn't cry until my dad drove into Goree and pointed out where his well had once stood. I saw the church, the church I remembered, with the steeple and the stained glass

window and as I cried I apologized and he patted my hand. Our sad little house so stuffed with memories so painted with my blood was guarded by a snarling dog on a leash. "I don't want it. You can have it," I did not say.

And then we visited your second daughter, my grandmother, and then we went to the cemetery down the road from the gymnasium where I won that beauty pageant when I was seven years old. I saw your grave and your first husband's grave and your son's grave. I took dirt from every grave I visited, put the clumps of dry Texas soil in my left pocket.

When I got home I bought a plant. A cyclamen. I love the red blooms. I call it my ancestral plant. The pocketed dirt is married to the bought dirt. And this, my great-grandmother, somehow makes me feel less beggar, more queen. You were so good in your garden. I could not hope to compete. But for me the one plant is sufficient.

