

THE HAUNTING

In a local jewelry store the other day, I overheard a customer asking questions about her heirloom jewelry and began thinking of MY heirloom "jewels." My mother always referred to hers as "droolery," those precious stones she loved to wear that I have never been interested in. I'd rather wear my lapis lazuli beads interspersed with freshwater pearls or a silver costume chain covered with small, dangly silver circles than a gold chain with a ruby or emerald pendant. I usually wear silver jewelry and never wanted a diamond ring; my first engagement ring consisted of a single pearl; only a silver band symbolized our union the second time I tied the knot.

Mom surrounded herself with the finer things in life, even though she could rarely afford to own anything expensive. Yes, she had ruby earrings and necklace to match, but the gems were small. Yes, she had a giant opal pendant in a gold setting, but my father dug the stone out of a pile of rocks in Thailand. The unusual pendant, hand-crafted by a local Thai jeweler, cost barely a song. Dad also had a bespoke wool suit hand sewn by a local Thai tailor, but when it arrived shortly after he returned home, the suit appeared like fancy prison garb, the chalk stripes horizontal. He never wore it. My childhood house was filled with mahogany antiques and fine china, purchased at auction when Dad was stationed in Scotland during my youth—secondhand heirlooms.

I cannot picture my beloved mother's face in my early childhood. She is never before my eyes but always in the background. I was the eldest of three daughters born in five years, so she was covered up with babies till I was probably six-years-old, and then had three small girls and a household to care for. She was always behind me, though, keeping us safe, warm, and fed. She did her best to care for her brood and husband throughout her life. The only pictures I can conjure up of her during my early years are from photographs: Mom in her cat-eye glasses, placing a lighted homemade cake before a birthday girl—mom in a red sweatshirt sitting on a log before a campfire.

I see Mom in the car on many long road trips, but always from the back or side. I see her in the kitchen, experimenting with a new recipe from a women's magazine. I see her nine months pregnant on Christmas Day, having moved into a new house just a few weeks before, in the aftermath of a snowstorm. She managed to set up a tree with plenty of gifts below, cooked a holiday meal, and, once again, created a home in a new house. The photo is of Mom in her nightclothes, her giant belly collapsed in the living room armchair, completely done in as she scowled into the lens. I got a camera that Christmas when I was nine, and I don't recall why I chose to capture this moment. My baby brother was due that Christmas Eve but didn't join us till January 11.

Because I never liked real jewels, preferring hippy beads and pendants, Mom gave all her good jewelry to my sisters. I still wonder why she willed me her engagement ring, though, with the stipulation that it should be worn every day as it had been since Dad purchased it. Being a dutiful, loving daughter, I tried. Honestly, I did. I wore that diamond engagement ring next to my plain silver wedding band – till I could stand it no longer. Taking it off, I had to forcefully tell myself that Mom couldn't rule my life from the grave!

So, there I was, talking to a jeweler about my heirloom pieces and having to silence Mom's critical voice in my head. "You're NOT getting rid of your grandmother's watch, are you? And how can you think of letting go of Nanny's cameo? It's been in the family for over a hundred years!" My grandmother saved a whole year to buy this Lucien Picard watch, its tiny face surrounded by rubies, the summer I was born in 1956. Research shows these luxury brand vintage watches are selling anywhere from \$4,750 to less than \$100. I would be silly to allow it to languish in the recesses of my jewelry box. The few times I have worn it, I would look down at my speckled arm sporting the watch and see my grandmother's wrist.

The same price spread is listed for vintage cameos. Mine, "depicting a scene rather than a human face, is uncommon and may appraise higher." Or so says Wikipedia. It has spent years on the lapel of the first black dress coat I ever bought, hanging in the back of the guest room closet. Knowing my own daughters' lifestyles, I don't think any of them would treat these pieces differently than I have. So, I might as well see what I can get for them. HUSH, Mom!

My mother loved her “things,” her Wedgewood, her silver (that she enjoyed polishing as long as I knew her), the antique china punchbowl that now sits on a heavy silver tray on my sideboard, keeping a circle in the center clear of oxidation. The tray is grey due to being covered in dust and needing to be polished. The punchbowl, my parent’s wedding gift, was so valuable to my mother that she carried it on her lap to her new home rather than risk packing it in a box. It is now holding dog toys. Again, I picture my deceased mother rolling over in her grave, if not sitting upright in indignation! Many of these pieces had personalities and stories she loved to tell as if they were family. How I wish she had written them down so we could retell them!

These heirlooms have been an albatross around my neck for far too long! It's past time to find another home for them. If there is any life in something like my cameo, it needs to continue living with someone who appreciates it. And besides, I could use the money!