

LISA HARRIS

## The Memory Box

**I**t was a mid-October Tuesday when I learned that we exist merely as trinkets and gene fragments. Nothing more.

My husband, Peter and I shared high-time dreams during our journey to Tucson's Cancer Center for his second round of chemotherapy. He talked of his soon-to-be-completed novel, his passion for fishing, the tip of Long Island. Peter wanted to show Lyda, our year-and-a-half old daughter, fishermen in their Boston Whalers hauling in bay scallops and halibut with the morning tide. He wanted to show her where he grew up. I spoke of upcoming holidays, roast turkey, pumpkin pie, dolls wrapped in colorful paper, a noble fir adorned with shiny glass balls. A steam locomotive's roar, louder than usual in the cool morning air, intruded into our illusions. At the hospital, it hurtled ever closer, belching coal dust fumes in its wake, when the doctors postponed treatment and admitted Peter to the sixth-floor cardiac ward to sooth his racing heart and counteract his low blood oxygen count.

The engine had first appeared at the horizon on Independence Day as a dry cough, masquerading as Valley Fever. The ebony specter steadily approached as prescribed treatments failed. Peter's coughing grew worse as the train's wheels raced along the shiny metal track, cutting a swath through the lush garden of our lives. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack.

The scarlet letters painted on its coal bin became legible come Labor Day, our wedding anniversary, "adnocarcinoma of an unknown origin," perhaps originating in the salivary glands, but the doctors would never know for sure.

Ranting, pleading, cleaning, praying, cooking, bargaining, and cajoling would not slow the iron horse. It relentlessly galloped forward. I tried to blot out its omnipotent presence and pretend not to see the rails, but the fear and anger spewing from its smoke stack poisoned my spirit with each breath I took.

The hospital nurse requested I return with Peter's overnight clothing and necessities. At home, I rummaged through the closet, finding a used gym bag stuffed in the corner. I displaced Peter's swimming trunks, fins, and goggles, with pajamas, a worn purple toothbrush, a half-empty can of shaving cream, and a dull razor. About to close the door, I noticed the container on the closet's top shelf. Across its side, my mother had written "The Memory Box" in her loopy handwriting.

Far from ordinary, this cardboard carton held my family history, memories of the past. Inside was a jumble of letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and children's artwork. Stored lives. I unfolded the cardboard flaps and inhaled the smell of aged paper, reminiscent of the joy associated with discovering a long-sought-after text in a used bookstore.

On top I found a picture of Peter. The image captured a rugged young man smiling slightly. His thick long eyelashes, the type women killed for, framed his dark eyes. He was wearing a blue-jean jacket with white fleece inside. His loose, curly black hair was ruffled by the blustery day.

My mother had handed me the carton a decade ago when she and my father retired. “It’s the family,” Mom said, relinquishing both ownership and role of record keeper. “Take good care of it,” she added, patting the box goodbye.

Mom had acquired the container twenty years earlier. As she prepared for a cross-country move, my mother had chucked family photos and documents into the box and labeled its sides with a black magic marker. Over the years she’d thrown in more papers, more photographs, more proof of our existence. She’d fetch it from the garage, the closet, or the basement, depending on which house we lived in at the time, and together we’d sit at the mahogany dining-room table. She’d review its contents with me, sharing stories of my ancestors, using a photograph or a watch or a piece of jewelry, some keepsake, to paint a picture of ordinary folks long gone.

From the box I learned my people came from England, Prussia, Germany, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. We were Jews, Catholics, Methodists, and Lutherans, and worked as teachers, farmers, salesmen, seamstresses, doctors, liverymen, and cigar makers. We had a green thumb and a talent for intricate embroidery and cooking.

I remember studying photographs of my grandmother, great-aunt, great-grandfather, and spotting a familiar chin, an eye, a nose. Identifying my features on other people’s faces, traits traveling through time on fragments of genes, which unfolded, intermingled, and transcribed the future, creating me. In turn, I would transfer these characteristics, these signs of kinship, to the next generation, just as my mother had handed down the box of cherished mementoes.

Next, I retrieved a photo taken on our wedding seven years earlier. We sat on a bench in my parent’s garden with our arms wrapped around each other, looking forward to the rest of our lives together. We smiled into the camera, our future as lush as the fuchsia blooms on the peonies. Who would have thought our bouquet would fade so soon.

At the hospital nurses glanced away and doctors fidgeted when I asked questions. Lyda and I stayed well into the night, me rambling, filling the air with words, and Peter nodding, the exertion from speaking too great. Lyda played, pushing buttons on the console and summoning harried staff, until boredom overtook her and she fell asleep on the bed. I collapsed into an overstuffed chair shoved against the window. Behind me through the window, lights twinkled like sequins scattered across a velvet blanket, as people went about their evening rituals. I longed to be out there. I imagined making dinner, discussing the day’s events, preparing for work the next day. I would answer the question, “How was your day, Honey?” with “Fine, just fine. A good day,” as I sorted through the mail on the kitchen counter. How I wished to trade places with one of the twinkling lights.

Peter pulled the oxygen mask from his face, and said, “You’ll...” in a halting voice. He replaced the mask, breathed, and raised his hand, signaling more, or not to object, or both. Slowly, between gasps of air, he freed me of obligations he thought I might have. That I would marry again. That Lyda would call someone else Daddy.

“How was your day, Honey?” The twinkling lights behind me asked. “Fine. Just fine. A great day,” I replied. If only it were so.

At home, I pawed through the box, the train’s rolling thunder somewhat quieter as I shifted through remembrances. I extracted a picture of my grandmother, my daughter’s namesake, Lyda Lee Lockridge, called Lockie by her family. Lockie sat with her profile to the camera for a picture-

postcard she would use in her teacher's applications. Her dark dress appeared stiff. She wore pince-nez glasses, anchored to her thick wavy hair with a pin, the lens of the right eye just visible. My grandmother handed down more than the recipe for springerle cookies she baked each Christmas—she had given me her high cheekbones and thick hair, as well—family secrets and genes traveling across generations.

Lockie's father had died in a train accident in "Old Mexico" when she was seven. I wondered what memories my grandmother held of her father. What memories would my daughter have of Peter? Probably not many. The Memory Box offered no images of Lockie's father, only scraps from his life, a collapsible tin drinking cup and a folded 35-starred American Flag he carried in the Civil War. I would never know if he and I shared a gene for high cheekbones or thick wavy hair.

I found a porcelain, heart-shaped case while repacking the box. Inside was a locket of fine chestnut hair tied with a tiny pink ribbon, Lyda's hair from her first haircut, saved the previous spring before the Juggernaut appeared in our lives. She'd sat in her highchair as I'd snipped around the base of her neck with my sharp embroidery scissors. Peter had gathered a clump from the floor and secured it with the ribbon. The hair resembled his as a young child, he'd said. He'd placed the remnant in the tiny box and added it to my cardboard container.

The next morning, sparks flew from the train's wheels as the iron road pierced my soul and left a metallic taste in my mouth. The locomotive's rumbling was so loud that I could barely hear the doctors tell me Peter should return home for hospice care.

I retrieved the box from the closet's shelf while I waited for the transport ambulance to arrive with my husband. Wedged between college year books, I found a wooden black sign faded by the sun, "Route 2 Box 780," it read in white carved letters. Screws dangled from the bottom, where it once attached to a mailbox outside our home near Portland. The address symbolized a demarcation of before and after, a turning point in family history.

The two-story white clapboard house sat on the southern bank of the Clackamas River. We often heard banging as we climbed the central oak staircase. My mother attributed the sounds to the original owner's ghost, a ship captain overseeing his domain. Three days before Christmas in 1964, when I was four, snow-melt waters brimmed the river's bank and swept through the house, leaving behind five feet of mud in the living room, ruining almost everything my parents owned, and washing the ship captain away.

Once the waters subsided, my parents and teenage brother removed the mud and debris. They hauled forty-five loads of sodden books, broken dishes, faded Christmas decorations, and soggy family memorabilia to the river's edge in a wheel barrel. We watched the water swallow souvenirs of our lives like the river washed away the ship captain. What salvageable family history remained, my mother tossed into a new moving container, and marked it "The Memory Box."

The Clackamas' swirling waters snatched more than precious treasures. My sister, the eldest of us three, and seventeen at the time, left. Moved in with friends and told my mother that this was not her flood. She never returned and years later requested we no longer contact her. I would not find traces of my sister in The Memory Box. My mother packed up her artwork, school report cards, blue ribbons won at equestrian events, and a high school yearbook long ago.

As I replaced the wooden address, I wondered if the imminent collision with the train would become my watershed and divide my life. If so, like my mother and her flood, I would never be the same.

I dug deeper, to the bottom, and retrieved a man's gold pocket watch and chain. "RHG" was engraved on the cover, for Richard Harmon Grogan, my father's grandfather. Dead so long ago, his

watch was the only sign of his existence. My father once showed me a photo of him taken in mid-life. If I'd met my great-grandfather on the street I would have mistaken him for my brother.

I rubbed his watch and wondered how many times he had touched it. I placed the time piece against my cheek. The metal was smooth and soothing. I wound the top, and as if my ancestor tried to reach across time to comfort me, the watch commenced to tick.

Lyda crawled into my lap and draped her arms around my neck. She hugged me tightly. I held her gaze for a brief second. She smiled, accentuating her high cheekbones, my grandmother's cheekbones. Her chubby hand reached towards a photograph peeking from the cardboard flap of an ordinary-looking container, now tattered from time, full of cherished flotsam.

Our future memory is shaped by the traits we pass on and the objects others choose to remember us by. We exist in pieces, as life's detritus and genes, rushing from the past into the future, handed from one generation to the next, bits embellished and shed as time unfolds. Once gone, we are never whole again. High-check bones and chestnut-colored hair will transcend this generational slice in time. My harbinger of change will rush into the night, its engine silent for evermore.

I closed The Memory Box and returned it to the top shelf of my closet. I realized that the next time we visited I would add the unfinished words of Peter's novel. One more life in the box. I gathered my baby and left for the future.