



*Writerly*

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BECOMING • COMING OF AGE

# The Bedside Table

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I've rarely met a book I genuinely loathed, but the memory of a book I encountered at the tender age of four still makes my skin prick with irritation. It was a Little Golden Book called *The Littlest Angel*. The story was about a child who dies and doesn't adjust well to heaven because he misses Earth and his family (heaven as portrayed in this book seems really unfun and somber, so of course the little angel hated it). Some older angels fetch a box of things the child had treasured most on Earth, hoping to make him feel better. I've forgotten most things that were in the box, but I remember that his pet dog's collar was there. That was too much for me. At four, my grasp of mortality was shaky, but the idea that dying meant I'd have to leave my dog behind and go to a boring, dog-less eternity gave me nightmares. I guess I started talking about death a bit too much, because my mother took that book away. I still thought about the angel's box, though – the idea that each of us carries a box filled with a handful of treasured objects that define us.

I've seen a lot of boxes lately. When both my parents died within six weeks of each other last year, it fell to my sister and I to pack up the contents of their house. We started with the easier rooms, like the kitchen and spare room closets. My sister carefully put things into well-labeled boxes and designated different corners for "Donation" boxes and "Keep" boxes. I was in charge of throwing garbage bags into a fast-growing Trash pile. My sister contemplated the significance of every object in that house, but I

saw no point in keeping 40-year-old toys or warped 45 records. You can bet that when I came across the copy of *The Littlest Angel*, it went swiftly into the Trash pile.

We left my parents' bedroom until the end. It felt final and intrusive to pack up their most personal things. The Trash pile stayed small. My sister and I each had a pile of things we didn't really want, but didn't feel right about throwing away. A bundle of old Valentine cards. Some prayer books. Costume jewelry.

The bedside tables were the last things we opened.

The things we keep in our bedside tables are often the things we most want to hide from the world. The questionable reading material. The vibrator. The love letters from a long-ago romance. Like the Littlest Angel's box, bedside tables contain treasures and secrets. They tell a story about a person like no other drawer in the house.

My dad's bedside table was orderly and held few surprises. Snapshots from business trips and dozens of matchbooks from expensive restaurants in San Francisco, London, and New York. A handful of rosaries. Broken watches and uncoupled cufflinks. Photos and death notices of his brothers and sisters, tucked into his own father's prayer book.





My mother's bedside table, on the other hand, was not at all like the tidy house she'd always kept. Its drawers were stuffed and chaotic, much like I pictured her mind in the last years of her life, when dementia stole her away.

We weren't close, my mother and I. Growing up, I saw her as the template for What Not to Be. What would my mother do? I'd wonder, and then I'd do the opposite. When I was young, she seemed sullen and joyless. Now that I'm grown, I can see that she was bored and unhappy and lonely. My father often traveled for work, leaving her home with my sister and brother and I. Her life was watching soap operas and going into town for groceries on Thursday mornings. Her world was

small, and she seemed to like it that way. She disliked having people over or venturing too far from home. When we went to our cottage, she'd stay inside. I don't know why she ever agreed to get a cottage, because she hated the water. I have only a few memories of her coming down to the beach with us – she'd wade no more than ankle deep into the Northumberland Strait, leaving as soon as we started splashing. She didn't own a swimsuit.

I always suspected that she might have wanted more. She had a job, briefly, in the months before she married my father in 1957, but she never told me much about it. One of the first things we found in her bedside table was a snapshot of her walking arm-in-arm with her coworkers at Nova Scotia Light & Power. In it, she's laughing and dressed smartly, shoes and purse matching, lips heavy with lipstick, and her flame-coloured hair styled like Marilyn Monroe's. I never saw my mother wear makeup. I stare at the snapshot. I don't recognize her. I put the photo in my Keep pile, and put it in a silver frame when I get it home.

Next, we found her report cards, all the way from Grade One in a one-room schoolhouse to Grade Twelve at the rural high school. She was at the top of her class in everything except math (we had that in common). If it had been a different time and place, she'd have won scholarships with those grades and gone on to study something like English Literature. She adored books. Even at the end, when dementia had stolen most of life's pleasures, she insisted on having books around. She loved a mystery, even though she read the same two pages over and over and never found out whodunnit.

Girls from poor Nova Scotia coal mining communities didn't go to university, though. And women like my mother didn't study English Literature. They became housewives.

My mother's feelings for me were equally complicated. By the time I was a teen, our relationship was frayed by resentment. I resented her distance and refusal to have fun. She resented





my freedom and opportunities. The fact that I became a writer seemed to annoy her. I stopped showing her my writing before I even finished high school, knowing she'd dismiss it without praise. When my first book was published, she showed up late to the book launch and left early.

Near the top of the bedside table's drawer, under a bundle of birthday cards and yellowed letters to Santa written in my childish printing, my sister found a manilla envelope. My name was written on the front in my mother's fine cursive. The envelope was her archive of my writing – everything from a story about the Muppets I'd written at age seven, to high school essays I thought I'd thrown out, to clippings of stories I wrote as a journalist in my 20s. I placed them all back in the envelope, assuring myself that her keeping them was the same as her telling me, "I liked this".

At the bottom of the drawer, my sister found the true treasure: a small, leather-bound travel journal and an old bread bag filled with mementos from a trip to New York my mother made in the summer of 1952, when she was just 15.

My mother had family who lived in Amityville, New York (yes, *that* Amityville). They came home for a visit every summer, and in 1952, they took my mother back with them for two months. At 15, my mother hadn't traveled more than an hour from the village of River Hebert, Nova Scotia. She was used to gravel and dirt roads, so it's easy to imagine how unprepared she was for interstate highways and the Lincoln Tunnel. Yet she embraced the change from the beginning of the journey:

#### **July 1st 1952**

*We left River Hebert Sunday afternoon at 2:00... As we passed through Moncton, I saw my first glimpse of a city. I like the look of Moncton and think it wouldn't be a bad place to live.*



Amityville had traffic lights and crosswalks. Her aunt and uncle had a refrigerator, and she could have ice cream whenever she wanted (and she did – she mentions having it almost every day). And there was a television! Refrigerators and televisions hadn't yet arrived in rural Nova Scotia, and my mother was fascinated. Every diary entry includes a description of what she watched that day.

#### **July 7th 1952**

*This evening, we watched television which was very good.*

*"The Missing Lady"*

*"Two Many Winners"*

*"The Gas House Boys in Hollywood or Bust"*

*"What's Your Line?"*

*"Space Cadets"*

I sat on my parents' bed while my sister read the travel diary aloud. My mother's 15-year-old voice was full of wonder and excitement.

#### **July 8th 1952**

##### **Jones Beach**

*Uncle Erwin & Aunt Marg & I went shopping. They bought me a bathing suit, a pair of shorts and a brief blouse and then Sidney suggested we go to the beach.*

(I wonder to myself if that was the only bathing suit my mother ever owned.)

*The beach stretches for 25 miles with nothing but fine white sand. Talk about people! Then, on the beach is an indoor swimming pool. There is a very large building where hot dogs, hamburgers, pop, soup, practically everything is sold. Then there is a large outdoor restaurant with cute chairs & tables. Then quite a ways down the beach is a large dance hall which is a very beautiful building. We were on the Atlantic side*

*of the beach which was terribly crowded. I have never seen so many people before of every nationality, race, and color. I bought myself a bathing cap. I went swimming in the pool, it was beautiful there and I didn't want to come out. Then we went into the ocean. I got such a burn that I can hardly walk.*

I never once saw my mother go into a swimming pool, no matter how much I begged. I had no idea she could even swim.

My mother often told us she hated boats and got seasick. She'd stay firmly on land whenever water was involved. But her travel journal describes her joy at going out on her aunt and uncle's yacht every few days. My sister read the July 12th entry twice, because neither of us could take in the difference between 15-year-old Adrienne and the woman who said even looking at the sea made her throw up.

#### **July 12th 1952**

##### **Sailing afternoon**

*About quarter to three we set out to go sailing. Talk about fun! We sailed for 3 ½ hours but stopped out in the ocean so we could swim. [Cousin] Bernie got 24 oysters. While we were out sailing, an aeroplane passed overhead and wrote, "Now's the time for Jello".*

*We got home about 6:30. Now we are watching television.*

Her entries during that first month show my mother getting increasingly comfortable with navigating the world on her own. She's scared of the traffic lights at first, but she becomes quite good at getting around on her own. She sounds proud.

Amityville was one thing. Experiencing New York City would be quite another.

#### **Aug. 8th 1952**

##### **Friday**

##### **New York City**



*We arrived at Penn Station about 2 mins to 11. We ate right in Penn Station. Then we went to Saks store. This store is 7 stories so we had fun taking the escalators and elevators. Aunt Marg let me do them a few times. From here we took a cab to another store.*

*As we walked along I saw the Empire State Building in the distance, also Times Square, Grand Central Terminal, Central Park, the Woolworth building, the Post Office & the Penn Railway Station. From there we went to Radio City Music Hall. The show playing was "Ivanhoe". The show lasted 3 hours. 1 hour of stage acting such as dancing, chorus girls, etc., then 2 hours for the main show. The music was some good. We didn't get home until ten minutes past one and didn't get to bed until 1:30. Talk about excitement!*

My father adored musicals. My mother hated them. She grudgingly attended my high school music performances, but she made it clear she didn't enjoy it. My dad managed to take her to a few shows when they'd go to London, but her protests were more dramatic than the performance.

"Why can't they just tell the story?" she'd complain. "All that singing in the middle of a conversation gives me a headache. It's ridiculous."

Had she actually liked musicals all along? Why had she said she didn't?

**Aug. 21st**  
**Returning Home**

**TCA 462 Boston-St. John**  
**426 St. John-Moncton**

*Arrived in St. John about 8:45. Had to stay here until 12:00 or so to wait for the next plane. Was kept amused by the time keeper & clerk, also met a few high school boys & girls.*

*Bought some souvenirs. Two air force planes arrived while I was there, with a number of men.*

*Arrived in Moncton about 12:45AM. No one there to meet me. Decided I might have to spend the night in the airport.*

There'd been a miscommunication about the day of her arrival, and her parents weren't at the Moncton airport to meet her. River Hebert was two hours away over rough roads – there was no point calling her parents until morning. She was ready to stay overnight in the small airport, but a man who'd been on the plane with her offered to get her a hotel room.

My blood runs cold when I read this. I know how naïve my mother was. Was this man trying to seduce her? Would she have even known that?

*The American gentleman suggested we go to a hotel, & he would pay for the expenses, but I said, no thanks. Thought I had some relatives in Moncton so got a hold of a phone book and looked. Found a Copp at last, called him & in no time flat was taken to his home. Called Mom the next day & they came & got me.*

I exhale. I wonder if my mother had been just as relieved. I realize there are things she isn't saying in this diary. Was she editing herself in case her mother asked to read it? I smile at the idea of my dull mother as an unreliable narrator.

That's where her story ends.

My sister closes the notebook, and we're silent. I look through the post cards and programs from Radio City Music Hall, hoping for hints of other adventures. I've never read anything else my mother wrote. She didn't keep a journal. This is the only glimpse I have into her mind, and it isn't the person I thought I knew.

We're left with so many questions. As we finish packing up boxes, my sister and I wonder how the experience changed our mother. What was she



like when she got home? Did her world seem smaller? Was she unhappy with the simplicity and lack of modern conveniences? Was she sad not to have ice cream and television every day?

As I tuck her mementos back into the bread bag, I wonder how that adventurous girl disappeared. What personal earthquake swallowed her up? Or was she still there all along, worn down, invisible, and buried by life's broken promises?

Did she look back on the trip to New York as the best time in her life, or was it the worst – making everything that came afterward dull and disappointing?

There are no other journals, no notebooks from the many trips she took with my father – no other insights into the way she saw the world. That bread bag held her treasures, and the bedside table kept her secrets. Like most personal treasures, only the person who holds the box knows the full meaning.

My parents have been gone almost a year now. I knew my father. He was open and enthusiastic about life. I know now that I didn't know my mother, at all. I'll never know why there was such a disconnect between adventurous and happy 15-year-old Adrienne and the woman she became.

I still have a Keep box in my storage closet filled with things from my parents' house. It's filled with things I didn't want to let go of, but didn't want to take out and look at. Just as I did at age four when I thought of the Littlest Angel's box, I look at the Keep box and think of my own mortality. I wonder what treasures I'll leave for my children to put in boxes or push into trash bags. I wonder if my treasures will be mysteries they can't decipher. I think about the things we keep and the things we throw away. I think about the parts of us that we hide, and those we dare others to interpret.

There are gaps in my mother's story I'll never fill in. She didn't have a chance to write much in her life, but she left us an unfinished mystery.

