

TRUE WORDS

from

Real Women

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Open Hearts Shine In Open Faces

Kathryn V. White, Seattle WA

Open hearts shine in open faces

As I search the corridors of time
for my selves.

All lined up, standing beside
what once were closed doors.

Each one magnificent.
Each one with her own story to tell.

How could I have hidden thee?

When the smiles of your eyes
warm my heart so.



The Quilt

Enid Cokinos, Carmel IN

My mother collected fabrics the way some women collect jewels. Yards, quarters, and strips – remnants from clothes and costumes sewn for family, and contributions from friends and neighbors – were all stored in an old black steamer trunk in our attic. Those fabrics were her diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Mom could not know when she lost her battle with breast cancer in 1977, only days after my sixteenth birthday, that her sisters would transform pieces from her treasure chest into a quilt for me, her youngest child.

The quilt covered my teenage bed, partly for warmth, partly in remembrance. Then something inside me changed: adulthood, reemerging grief, I am not sure. I could no longer be confronted with the ghosts woven into those fibers. Moving across multiple states, multiple times, over multiple years, provided a convenient excuse to keep it stored in a closet or a lidded tub at each relocation. "Protection against the elements and damage," I told myself. "Safer that way," I reasoned. But the real explanation was, "Out of sight, out of mind."

Perhaps it is the nostalgia that comes with age, my leap into creative writing, or both, that is teaching me to be more aware of my surroundings, attentive to conversations, and mindful of my past – even those times filled with painful memories. This expanding desire to reflect allowed me to push aside old fears and drag the quilt out of storage on a dreary day last winter.

Secure in its protective bag, and sandwiched between a stack of spare blankets, the quilt sat on the top shelf of our guest room closet. On tippy-toes, I carefully shifted and inched the layers to free the bag, while trying to avoid an avalanche. The clear, zippered bag revealed familiar colors and patterns, triggering a wave of guilt for secreting my quilt away for so long.

I removed the neatly-folded patchwork bundle from the bag, caressing the soft, age-worn cotton, and noting the handiwork. This twin-size collage of memories was created from a hodgepodge of uncoordinated, printed fabrics selected and cut to resemble pointy bowties and sewn onto a random assortment of solid-color squares.

Several bowties were immediately recognizable. One was light brown with tan flowers from the sash of a favorite dress. Another one, a mixture of pink and purple blossoms like a Japanese garden, was from the kimono I wore in a grade school play, or maybe for a theme day. Yet another was from the matching dresses and bonnets my sister, Eileen, and I wore for our hometown's centennial celebration – red with tiny gold buttercups. However, many of the fabrics were unfamiliar gems from Mom's treasure-trove, with hidden stories of their own.

Near the end of my mom's life, I remember her working on

blocks for a quilt that she and her sisters were creating, but I do not know for whom. Logic tells me that leftover blocks from that project were used for my quilt, but I wanted to know the whole story of how it came to be.

My teenage memories are sketchy at best – normal given the passing years, but I suppressed much of it from the pain of my mother's illness and death. Vague recollections and hazy images from the day of her funeral come to me – my maternal aunts looking through that old black steamer trunk, gathering up the quilt blocks Mom created, along with other fabrics. But I needed help assembling those scattered memories.

I penned a letter to my Aunt Elinor, Mom's youngest sister and only living sibling, hoping she could solve the mystery and fill in the blanks. It felt awkward writing to her. Would questions about Mom and the quilt cause her unnecessary pain? My letter, crafted with well-chosen words, was signed with love and sealed in an envelope along with my hope that she could tell the story I needed to hear.

Hope dwindled as days became weeks – two, then three, then four – with no response. A reply finally arrived on a cold February day more than five weeks later. I anxiously opened the small pink envelope and pulled out the matching stationery. Aunt Elinor's beautiful handwriting, so like my mother's, was familiar and comforting.

My sweet aunt updated me on family, friends, and the weather. Apparently, heavy snow and ice had kept her from getting down the driveway to drop her letter in the mailbox.

Shifting topics, Aunt Elinor explained that over the years she and her sisters – my Aunts Lila, Marie, and Martha – often gathered at Martha's house to tie quilts (one of the final steps). However, she apologized for not remembering much about my quilt...

...I bet we did that for you, but like you, a lot of time is a blur in my memory.... You needed more years with your wonderful mom. I would say just enjoy your quilt and remember the good times. So often I wish I could ask my siblings a question. I didn't ask enough when they were here.... You take care and enjoy your life. I'm happy for you and so is your mother.

Lots of Love, Aunt Elinor

I may never know the whole story of my quilt, but her caring words were enough to help me move on, and to enjoy this gift from my past.

My quilt is now proudly displayed on my office couch. I wrap it around me when I am cold, when I need to cry, or feel my mom's presence. "Pretty" is not the first word that comes to mind when you see this handcrafted collection of memories, and it is not something you would gush over while browsing through Pottery Barn, but what it lacks in beauty, it more than makes up for in love.

