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The secret drawer
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Marilyn Gelman and her mother stand on Paterson's East 25th Street in this 1948 photograph.

Along time ago, when I was very young, even before I went to kindergarten, my mother told me a grown-up secret and told me never to tell. I never did. She told me about a secret drawer hidden in her bedroom set's vanity table that she kept in the living room and used as a desk.

Even though the desk sat between the front door and the steps up to the bedrooms, no junk ever accumulated on its surface; it seemed that no frivolous thoughts were there entertained. On the nights my mother uncased her Royal portable typewriter on the desk blotter to write letters about Paterson's Girl Scout Troop 7, the "Y" Woman's Club, the New Jersey Independent United Verein, and her couples' poker group stock club, I'd fall asleep to the lullaby of fast touch-typing, margin bells, and carrier returns.

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Because its use made the piece of furniture so imposing, I was well into my teens before I could see how it matched her bedroom set and the big mirror that hung in the front vestibule. But I was almost 50, with my mother dying and her living will and power of attorney in my purse, before I removed the upper right-hand drawer from its place and, with a sense of great sadness and loss, reached far into the recess and removed the secret drawer from its sacred space.

Marilyn Gelman and her mother stand on Paterson's East 25th Street in this 1948 photograph.

I had never, ever, looked into that drawer without my mother's invitation. Never, through all my childhood days in the house in Paterson, N.J.'s East 25th Street, nor as a curious teenager, nor as the house caretaker when my folks went away for two weeks in the summer, nor as a widow's daughter during my mother's travels with her friends.

The desk with the secret drawer was refinished and reunited with the rest of her bedroom set when my widowed mom moved into the "canasta" building.

The canasta building was the jewel of a set of mid-rise apartment buildings, similar in all respects, except that this building had enough canasta players for every night of the week. The canasta women, who grew up during the Depression, married around the World War II years and raised their families in Paterson, had kept their friends and enemies from the scout troops and women's clubs well into their could-have-been-lonely golden years. At about 7 in the evening, the elevator would be busy transporting beauty-parlored women, who would never come down for the mail in their nighties, wearing instead ironed, brightly patterned "shifts," "elevator coats," "dusters," or "robes" that fastened down the front with fabric covered snaps. The women wore full make-up, perfume, and scuff-style slippers; they carried little change purses and their apartment door keys. There was no need to import players from other buildings who would need either a husband or two women to escort them home at night.

These women were tough. Prepared to be wives all their lives, they survived becoming widows. As long as at least one of them still could drive, there were trips to the Paper Mill Playhouse and to the opera at Lincoln Center. They were experts at two-for-ones and early-bird dinners and once even demanded their senior-citizen discount when they mistakenly stormed a porno theater on a rainy Sunday evening. They formed eye-drop squads when one of them had cataract surgery and there were enough of them to have covered dish/canasta New Year's parties without leaving the building. They combined resources to survive blizzards and grandchildren and visiting sons and daughters from California. They were so coordinated that each sent in a dish when my mom was very ill — and, when all the dishes were combined, we had a holiday dinner for eight. It was the last holiday dinner we, the remains of our family, were to enjoy.

Before her illness made her bedridden, my sons and I would regularly surprise my mom on early Saturday evenings. We'd raid the refrigerator for potluck supper. The boys cooked and cleaned up, mom threatening them about the consequences of dirty dishes in the sink. She and I would gossip while she prepared to go out. In our most recent years, mom and I often referred to that secret desk drawer.

My mother would say, "I have a safety deposit box in such and such a bank. Now don't forget."

"Good, ma," I'd tell her. "Write it down on a piece of paper and put it in the little drawer. The first thing I'll do when you die is look there for instructions." Of course, I never expected her to die.

"I put my good jewelry in the linen closet except for my ring. It's at Sadie's," she'd tell me.

"Write it down, ma. I'll never remember. Put it in the little drawer," I'd respond.

And so through the years, whenever she tried to tell me something about a precious possession or the location of someone's grave, or the storage place of a certificate of some sort, my answer always would be the same.

"Write it down, ma. And put it in the little drawer."

My imagination flowered. That little drawer never could have held the wealth of riches and the volume of data I told her to consign to it over the years.

When she knew she had to go in for surgery, and she knew, but didn't tell me, it was because of the dreaded "C" word, my organized mother began her work in earnest.

Looking back, I can see her sitting at her desk, placing documents into 4 3/4x11-inch Kraft paper envelopes and filing the envelopes sideways in the second drawer on the right-hand side.

Even after surgery, so successful and so minor that the doctor danced out of the operating room in less than an hour and my mother returned to her job in less than two weeks, she continued to work on those envelopes.

"You know, when I die, I want...," she'd tell me and talk about the disposition of her possessions or what she wanted her funeral to be like. And I'd tell her to write it down and admonish, "You know where I'll go to find it."

I never took the "C" word seriously again. Of course, we were frightened when I took her for checkups, but the doctor said it would never come back in the same place. He was wrong. It went to a lot of other places too.

When it was time for my mother to turn control of her bills and resources and decisions to someone, she chose me. I was afraid to accept the responsibility; there would be no one to help me take care of the person who always took care of me; I took a few days to think it over.

I thought about our fights during my childhood and adolescence, and then how she helped me raise my sons. I liked her; we had made space for each other and loved one another as adults. So, both frightened and proud, like both the bride and the groom, I accepted the responsibility of managing her life, her death, and my fear of doing the wrong thing.

On the sad day when I began a new level of care over her affairs, I reached into that space within the furniture's frame and pulled out the little drawer, expecting it to be stuffed with documents, instructions, and jewelry. Instead I discovered what my mother valued most.

In the secret drawer, scattered in a single layer, were a dozen little keys; each key was on a little ring with a plastic piece of advertising or a small white paper circle.

Each key was labeled.

"Sadie."

"Pearl."

"Janet."

And so on.

Her most treasured things.

The keys to her friends' homes were stored in that secret drawer that I opened one painful day and learned what mattered most to my mom.