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Memories of mom tied up in bits of a life

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A note from Susan: Tears still creep into my eyes when I reread this. I heard from many people afterward about the things they saved. One woman cherishes what she found in her late mother's winter coat: a white tissue on which her mother blotted her lipstick.

From her dresser drawer I took her unopened underwear, white cotton Hanes, size 6 and 7.

From her bathroom drawer I took a jar of Clinique moisturizer with a pump top.

From a shelf in her closet I took one of her second-string black purses, with a little package of Kleenex and a couple envelopes of Shout left inside.

No coins loitered in the bottom of that purse. But Mom stood always prepared with Kleenex and stain remover.

I've kept the Kleenex and stain remover in her cosmetic travel bag that I now use. I've also kept her flimsy plastic case of Q-tips, smaller than a deck of cards.

Generally I clear out my ears at home, but I guess a day may come when they need purging on the road.

Actually, that's not it at all. The real truth is that since my mother died 30 months ago, I travel with those fuzz-tipped sticks not because I might need them but because I need her.

Their clean, happy readiness reminds me of her own.

They fit me just right

Many of my mother's things, in styles I would not have chosen for my own, now populate my life.

Before, my underwear drawer bulged with many brands and styles, symbolizing my ever-shifting size, moods and whims. Now, it holds a neat stack of Hanes I found in packages Mom bought -- on sale, I'm sure -- for her future.

They fit me just right.

She must have paid 20 bucks for the moisturizer, far more than I ever paid for the hand lotion I used even on my face.

But each morning after my shower now, I tap the pump and smooth a dab of the pale yellow lotion around the eyes that in my mirror are becoming my mother's.

Most of my adulthood I refused to wear earrings, thanking Mom for her persistent gifts of jewelry then stashing them away. Now, on special occasions, I wear the gold earrings I bought for her one Mother's Day long ago. Her first pair, they seemed to her terribly extravagant.

But she wore them all the time.

I make sugar-free Jell-O in her old Pyrex baking dish. I measure water for the Jell-O in her old Pyrex measuring cup. I check recipes in her "Joy of Cooking," where between the pages she pressed four-leaf clovers.

When grief surprises me, as it does more often than I'd like, I wish I could shrug on her Polartec jacket, the one with the weird blue and purple pattern of autumn leaves, the one she wore in the last photo of the two of us.

Instead, too early, I gave it to Goodwill.

My life might be full of her things except that my dad remains in the house they shared. At Easter, my father's new companion set the table with my mother's good china and silverware.

A friend who still has her mother asked, "Wasn't that terribly hard for you?" I said, "Not one bit. I was touched."

A comforting connection

Traditions can't last forever, of course. Some day my dad's new partner will set the table with her own dishes.

Some day I will empty Mom's jar of moisturizer. Some day the strap on my/her black purse will break.

Some day, given my history, I'll probably lose one of her gold earrings and certainly I'll wear out or -- worse -- grow out of her underwear. It pleases me, though, to know I can buy more, identical, at Target.

My head, my heart, my tastes and my values all shaped themselves from my mother's intangible words and example.

But the touch of her things, for this little while, keeps her next to me.