

Larger Than Life

by Katrina Dessavre

She told me one way to deal with it would be to put everything in a box and burn it.

"That's a bit dramatic," I said. I didn't know therapists had such vivid imaginations. I didn't say that last part.

"Or, just put it in a closet," she said. "The point is to contain those memories instead of letting them consume you." She had the calm, measured voice of a professional. I trusted her.

It took me hours to find the right box. I wanted to use the bucket she had thrown up in those few weeks when she couldn't keep any food down. All the lobster broths and miso soups and green juices she had me make that would turn to black bile in a matter of hours.

I settled on a plain filing box that looked like something a 50s secretary would fill on the last day of work and carry out of the office in tears.

The first thing I put in was her wig, the one I washed once a week with baby shampoo and styled with whatever new product she had ordered that week. It lay in the bottom of the box like a dead animal, the pelt of a radioactive fox. It was one of many white wigs I bought and dyed l'Oreal 41. Even with practice and plastic gloves I always ended up looking like Lady Macbeth.

I put in the clippers I cut her nails with when she was too nauseated to bend down. That last week it took her a full two days to notice that her feet and ankles had swollen to the size of pool floats. She looked down slowly and in silence with an expression of "oh, that too." We said nothing about it while I prepared a foot soak with lavender Epsom salts and tried to massage her taut, pinkish skin.

Two thirds of the box was still empty so I put in the blood pressure monitor, that mainstay of panicked, red-faced nights with fingers ready to dial emergency.

I topped it off with leftover bottles of morphine and a pair of Depends that thank god she never saw. I got them at Duane Reade at midnight after she couldn't get out of bed anymore. She died at

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seven-thirty that morning. I put one pair in the box and kept the rest under the bathroom sink. I figured they might come in handy on long car journeys.

“For that road trip I've always wanted to take,” I said brightly during my next visit, when she made me list all the items I had put in. She said it was a good exercise. I trusted her. She made notes on a legal pad.

“What about her rings?” she asked. I had mentioned how I forgot to take them off before the body stiffened and they were impossible to take off even with baby oil and petroleum jelly.

“Tossed those in as well,” I said. The truth was I couldn't bring myself to phrase the words “could you please cut off her fingers and save the rings, please” to the funeral people when they asked if I wanted an urn. I ended up digging through the plain blue box her ashes came in. I got half-way through, pulling up bony bits and expecting rings rings, before I gave up.

“Where is it now?” she asked.

“I burned it.”

She looked up from her legal pad. We waited until the smooth jazz elevator music paused between songs and started laughing until we both drew tears.

