

M Box

by Lynn Beighley

I'm in a steel cage in the warm, musty basement of the apartment building where our extra boxes are stored. I've been down here half an hour moving things around. At first I was nervous. It's windowless and lit by too few flickering lights. I've finally quit jumping every time I hear an odd noise, although there are enough bugs scurrying around that I stop to frantically shake my head or wipe my bare arms off every few minutes.

I'm down here to find a few of my favorite books that I refuse to get rid of. But I spot a particular stack of boxes and I can't ignore them anymore.

These boxes are sealed with yellowing tape. I'm pretty sure none of them have been opened since dad packed them the very first time we moved. Five years and three months ago. They have the letter M written on them in black marker.

M is for Maggie. My mother.

I pick up the kitchen knife, and before I talk myself out of it, I cut the tape on one of them. Too quickly, I also cut my finger. It's just a little cut. I could stop and go get a bandaid, but if I do, I'm pretty sure I won't come back down here. I use the bottom edge of my t-shirt and wipe my finger. I sit on a box and hold it as I wait for it to stop oozing blood.

I stare inside the box. I don't know what will be in there. What I'd like to find is a picture of the three of us, five-year old me and my parents, that was taken at Disneyworld. We're all wearing mouse ears, and dad's hamming it up by also wearing a princess tiara. I haven't seen this photo, or any of the photos we used to have around the house since right after it happened. I don't think dad threw them out. He did get rid of her clothes while I was away at Grammy Potter's. But he kept some of her stuff, and that's what I always figured must be in these boxes.

He says we're here for good. She needs to be here, too.

With my free hand, I reach over and open one of the flaps of this M box. There are DVDs on top, our family movies. I forgot about these. I take them out. Her jewelry box takes up much more of the interior. Along the side, on their edges, I see picture frames. I pull one out, and yes, it's the one I'm looking for. Me and dad, redhaired, the same smile, mine minus a front tooth. So clearly father and daughter. And there's my pretty blonde mom. Maggie.

Sometimes when you're supposed to smile for a photo, you don't feel like smiling. But you do your best, you smile. And then you see the pic of yourself later and you can just tell, in spite of the smile, that you weren't happy. If you put your hand over the lower part of the picture so you can just see your eyes, it's pretty clear what you were really feeling.

I do that now. And I shiver. My mom's eyes don't seem to have any expression. They look lifeless. Her eyes look... dead.

Stop it, Alison, I tell myself. You're being stupid.

I put that frame down and pull out another. This one is a wedding photo, taken in Vegas.

I'm in this one, too, but I wouldn't be born for another week. Mom looks happier here. She's wearing a baggy cotton dress and holding a ribbonwrapped bunch of echinacea. Dad is dressed like Elvis with a microphone, and is posed accordingly.

I used to hide this picture when my friends came over. Now I decide to put it on the table by the front door where my dad's girlfriend can't miss it. And I'll put the Disney photo in my room, I guess. Even though it kind of creeps me out now. Probably I'll turn it to face away from my bed so she won't be looking at me as I sleep.

Finally, I reach in to take out the third frame. As I do, I notice my finger has started bleeding and my hand is slick. The frame slips

from my hand and I hear the glass crack as it hits the floor. I wipe off my hand and reach down to pick it up.

It's a black and white photo of me as a baby with my mom holding me. My eyes are closed and my thumb is in my mouth. My mom is sitting next to a window, looking out. I resist the urge to interpret the look in her eyes. I use my shirt to clean my blood off the frame and I put it back in the box.

I want to look at everything in the M boxes, but I don't have time before dad gets home, and I'm dusty and kind of bloody and I need a shower. I close the flaps and put another box on top. I take the other two pictures with me.

