

The Cedar Chest

by Frank D. Moore

Uncle Slim made it for Grandmother. The sorrel wood reminded him of horses, its wavy blonde streaks the hair of a woman he once knew on the road.

He carried the chest to Grandmother and placed it near the fire. The only decorations, two small horseshoes cut from the same wood and centered on the front. We all sat round in silence, except Aunt Zella, who kept saying, “Pon my word and honor.” Long before he raised the lid, we could smell the woods.

Summer afternoons, when Grandmother would walk up to the Caudills, I would go through the chest—quilts, black dresses with a lace collar, a *New Testament*, a few silver dollars in a drawstring pouch, dollar bills in a brown window-envelope—until I arrived at Aunt Thelma’s love letters to Uncle Rudolph in the army, bundles tied in colored string, each letter thick in its own envelope. Stretched out on the cool linoleum floor, an ear turned to the sounds of the front gate, I followed their courtship, lingering over their first lovemaking in a St. Louis hotel room. “I still smell the wood scent of your aftershave, still feel your back in the palms of my hands.”

After Grandmother died, I took over the chest and filled it with my letters—from “pen pals” (my name and address having miraculously appeared in a magazine called *Wee Wisdom*), each packet delivered to my door by Conley Mainous on a horse. Some days I was the only one in Traveller’s Rest to receive mail. From across the Atlantic, Antony tutored me in soccer. Jane Baker from Iowa sent me a photo of herself behind a tree, naked, she said, though only one leg and shoulder were visible. I carried her in my billfold till the luminous skin and curly head of hair, like a halo, chipped and fell away. Alice of Elizabethtown wrote on fragrant paper, name and address printed at the top, only a few huge words to a page, words resembling rolling rings with wings and tails. She proclaimed her undying love for me; I wrote back swearing mine for her. Then, because I mentioned something about another girl, Alice suddenly fired back: “I thought you loved only me. I may have to kill myself.” She was playing a game, but I took her seriously.

At sixteen, I left Traveller’s Rest for good—left by the narrow footpath around the cliff-top, dew from the weed falling on my new shoes, fog lifting from the creek—left behind the cedar chest with its six years of words to me. “No point in keeping these,” said my mother, who, after reading every letter, made a fire in the garden.

After my mother moved away, the house stood empty except for the occasional family member seeking brief sanctuary or driving by on the way to somewhere else. The cedar chest became a catchall: old scarves and gloves, photograph albums, death

certificates, even a World War II bayonet with stained blade. Now and then, men rode their horses down the nearby hills and broke into the house, played poker and drank moonshine at the dining room table.

When Cousin Jo Anne drove down from Ohio to see the leaves turn color, she found the cedar chest in the woods: upright, lid open, warped from rain, planks beginning to separate, mud on the sides, inside a few leaves and a pine cone. Jo Anne picked up the chest and carried it to her truck, then delivered it to Aunt Clara in Ohio in the Henry A. Long Tower for senior citizens. Gnarled, twisted with arthritis, one leg ulcerated and useless, Aunt Clara sat on a straight-back chair, bending over the chest, cleaning, rubbing, rubbing till the aroma of cedar, nearly depleted during its abandonment in the woods, began to return. As she worked, she remembered Uncle Slim: fights in the kitchen, his quick withdrawals to his workshop, words she hurled after him: "Sleep with any damn tramp you want. I don't care."

After Aunt Clara tried to kill herself and had to move to the nursing home, I dealt with her things. In the cedar chest, among canceled checks and Uncle Slim's awards for country fiddling (and biggest surprise of all: Aunt Clara's filing-for-divorce papers which never went through), I found several packets of letters and cards from me to her, and at the bottom, a brown envelop with my name on it, containing \$1,000 she'd saved from her pension.

Now, the chest is in my house, in it a quilt made by Grandmother, pattern of horses in fading colors. When the first chill comes, I cover my bed with cedar.