

FROM

Hieroglyphics

BY JILL MCCORKLE

Lil

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Southern Pines, North Carolina

You two have always wondered why I spend so much time filling these notebooks (Frank, you, too, if you're reading this!), but it is simply a part of my life, a way to clear my mind and to remember. Sometimes I just record the weather, something simple about the day. It is so easy to let everything run together. I had years that were that way, and I find such loss troubling; better to try to define something, the premature blue dusk of a winter afternoon or the long, clear light of summer, that kind of light that makes you feel immortal. And I guess that's why we hold on to our bits and pieces in the first place, because we aren't immortal, and though denial fills our days and years, especially those that have slipped away, that kernel of truth is always lodged within.

We all are haunted by something—something we did or didn't do—and the passing years either add to the weight or diminish it. Mine have diminished, perhaps because I've spent time thinking about it all. It might sound silly, but I see these bits and pieces as my contribution to evolution, the unearthing and dusting of the prints and markers that led me here. Some seem to bulldoze right through life and up to their headstones, but I want to take my time. I want to find the right words.

I IMAGINE MY RECIPIENT to be you two, or perhaps your children, and I hope this is so, rather than some stranger who comes in and hoists old boxes

into a dumpster, or rakes away the remainders of my life, like the sad debris in the aftermath of a flood or fire. I will never get over the sight of what we left behind at our home of over fifty years to move down here, a mountain of cast-off things—old towels and linens, papers and books and shoes and pots, side tables and lamps, hoses and hoes, packets of seeds I meant to plant, and a rubber squeak toy that had been safely hidden away in the back of my closet by one of the dogs long dead. And so much more: things not needed, things long forgotten, cans of cream-of-whatever soup and V8 juice (why?) and peas that had sat there forgotten for years, and things that never should have been there in the first place, like Tuna Helper, or those things in my closet like that geometric-print minidress I bought in the '60s, hoping to look like Petula Clark or Judy Carne—a perky-pixie kind of dress that I never had the nerve to wear and instead looked at it there at the back of the closet for years, along with a wiglet and a long frosted fall and some jackets with shoulders resembling a football player or Victorian monarch. We divided it all into Goodwill, consignment, recycle, or landfill.

But there were also the things I couldn't let go of—letters, reminders, souvenirs—and I am taking my time, relieved when I find something that might have gotten lost in that mountain of debris, like one of your drawings from first grade or the stub from a movie I'd forgotten I even saw, or a note from my father.

When the moving van pulled away that afternoon and we got in the car and turned southward, the space within the car seemed so empty, vacant, our suitcases and silver chest in the trunk, an overnight bag and thermos of coffee on the back seat, and I had that terrible feeling that I had forgotten something. Because I was thinking of all the times the car was filled with you two, your belongings, your music and voices, the dogs, while going to school or on vacation, or just to the grocery store where I bought all of those things that I then put on the shelf there in our dimly lit pantry—on the red gingham contact paper I spent one snowy afternoon forty years ago cutting and sticking in place—all those things that I placed there and then forgot about.

I LIKE TO IMAGINE that I will be your cornerstone, a reminder of what was. The old building crumbles away, and yet there I will be (me, my life, our life) like when you were assigned time capsules in school. Remember?

You both were in elementary school and were asked what you would take to leave on the moon. And then *your* children did it again with the turning of the century, and asked us to write a letter about what has changed in our lifetime. Your father wrote a lot! And he even made a timeline about all that had changed about cars and appliances, the telephone and the mail.

I have been writing notes and saving bits and pieces since long before you both were born, my attempt at explaining my life to myself, perhaps. I have so little of my own mother and have spent much of my life yearning for more. This habit of mine, trying to hold on to those days, was simply a way to reassure myself and to recall every detail of her—all I knew of my parents' life together and all I knew of her death. I was afraid of forgetting, a fear that has never diminished, and now I *am* forgetting things. There's no denying that I am forgetting. We all joke about it at a certain age (you will, too) but there's a line you cross when you don't talk about it in the same way. I am eighty-five years old, so what do I expect? You're all grown; your children are even grown, so what do we expect? That's what I keep saying to your father: "What do you expect?" We have both already moved past the estimated life expectancy for men and women in this country. We have both long passed the ages our own parents were when they died.

Sometimes, I feel like my life is all laid out before me: dots connecting, patterns shaped and designed, words naming and classifying me. We all have those moments when we are so aware of where we are; there are the moments when we feel graced and blessed, and there are likewise those when we say, "What am I doing here?"

I have tried to imagine my mother on that last night of her life. Surely, she asked, "What am I doing here? Oh God, what am I doing?"

I asked myself that same thing in that empty-feeling car, your father silent behind the wheel, as we got on I-95 and instead of heading north to Gloucester, as we had a million times before, we went south and kept going the rest of the day, neither of us saying much and yet both aware of the sad, questioning cloud hanging over us. And after a restless night at a Holiday Inn somewhere in Maryland, we rode much of the next day, until we got here and met the movers—belongings we had had for years looking so different in the warm, bright light.

Remember how you were here to greet us, Becca? You were our reason for coming, and we are happy to have this time near you and your family, but I still wake some days and think: “What am I doing here?” Even though we have been here for over a year now, I panic, and then I try to rationalize it all, to name the reasons and the benefits of living here. We have followed the migratory path of the snowbirds we once saw as traitors—the weaklings, your father and I called them as we stood armed with our snow shovels and salt. And, yes, ice and cold are hard on brittle bones, and, yes, help is needed when dealing with worn-out hearts and lungs and words that won’t come. The love and attention of a child nearby cannot be underestimated—please know we are grateful, Becca. And yet there remain those parts of me that simply refused to come along, and they pull my mind this way and that all day, especially when I’m in here sorting through it all and trying to give it some order. I try to collect and hold on to them, but it is like grasping the wind, and yet those are the parts—what I knew as a child—that seem the truest parts of me.

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