Within These Walls

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I layed motionless on my parents’ bed so I would not disturb my mother as she tried to sleep. I quietly looked around the room at the flat yellow paint on the walls. They had been that buttercup-yellow color for as long as I could remember, and yet, they had not faded. The creamy color brought out the yellow specks in the puff balloon valances that hung, dusty, above the windows. It was an ugly color yellow, but that’s what mom and dad had wanted. They didn’t need to change it."

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My eyes continued to wander, and finally fixed on the small tan music box that was set on the hope chest in the corner of the room. The music box that had a shiny, lacquered finish, and on the lid was painted a young boy and girl holding hands by a lake. This music box was always a mystery to me because upon opening it, it played the theme music to *The Godfather*. The picture and the song did not quite go together. The entire essence of the box was all wrong. But still, it played beautiful music.

The hope chest was made of mahogany, or maybe a dark cherry wood. I could never tell the difference between the two. It was a relatively new furnishing in the room. Most women receive their hope chests as engagement of wedding presents from their mothers, passed on from their mother's mothers, and such, out of some sort of suspicion, I suppose. My mother lived for over 25 years without her good luck charm; she only received her hope last year, after her father died. I wondered why she hadn't gotten it sooner, and I imagined that it was because my parents met and married within a few month's time. My grandparents probably did not have a lot of time to prepare themselves for gift giving. And then daily life resumed, and before they knew it, she was fifty.

The last thing in the room that had caught my eye was their wedding picture, which still insisted upon hanging on the yellow wall after all of these years. One of my father's Navy buddies had photographed them on their
blessed day, as they had a small wedding on the ship on which he was stationed. The photo turned out remarkably well, I thought. I stared at that picture. The love that they shared radiated from behind the glass and transcended the two dimensions. It was enough just to look at them to believe in the power of love.

It was San Diego, May of 1968. It was too early in the evening to have drawn much of a crowd to the bar in which my father and his best friend, Norm, were relaxing and drinking after their duty one Friday. “There must have been a hundred tables and maybe five other people in the place when your mother and Aunt Betty walked in. They looked around for a few seconds, and sat at the table right next to us,” my father would always recount, smiling, and giving my mother a knowing look. The story never changed: “And I stared at her. She was so beautiful with her hair done up and sprayed into a perfect bee-hive, wearing that navy blue tailored dress that almost showed her knees. And she carried a crisp, white handbag. After we started talking, I looked down and noticed that I had grease under my thumbnail, so I sat like this the whole night.” Laughing each time, he’d show us how he had hid his thumb, bent under his index and middle fingers. “I didn’t want her to think that I was a bum,” he would say. She must not have, because four months later, they were married. I had to believe in destiny. My aunt’s date had canceled for the evening that they all met. But one question kept nagging me.

I loudly whispered, “Mom, Mom,” a couple of times, not wanting to wake her, but needing to. I finally had to jar her pillow with my elbow, and she creakily opened one eye. “Hmmm. What?” she muttered.

“O.K. . . O.K. But. . . How did you and Dad know that you were in love, after only, what, four months?” I asked.

“We weren’t,” she said. “I liked him a lot, and I knew that he was a good person. But we had to get married. Haven’t you ever done the math before?” she said in a matter-of-fact, if not bitter tone.

In that instant, the boxes in the corner of the room,
and the picture hanging on the yellow wall drained of all their meaning and became ordinary objects in an everyday life.

"So it didn't happen the way you've always said?" I asked, astounded.

"Not exactly. I'm sorry, honey. There is no such thing as true and everlasting love. We are all given lives and we have to make the best of them. You didn't know your aunt then, but she had been a wreck after her first husband died. She was terrified of being alone. That's why we went out that night. And neither of us were alone after that. Look. You think you have all of life's answers, or at least acquire some along the way. But in the end, you are just exhausted from trying to keep yourself happy, so you do what you need to to get by," she readily answered. I turned my head away from her, but I could still see her out of the corner of my eye. She looked at me and smiled apologetically, pulled at the blankets, turned onto her side, and fell asleep again.

--Theresa Keenan